

Lexical Pragmatics and the nature of word meaning

Bárbara Eizaga Rebollar

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1. Encoded meaning vs. communicated meaning

Speakers tend to frequently use words in ways that vary from their encoded literal meanings; they use words vaguely, metaphorically, hyperbolically or even create new ones. Here are some examples:

1. She's got a personality!
2. The Los Angeles Times proved this last week, with its high-minded but ultimately hilarious attempt to '**wikify**' its editorial column.¹
3. His brain is the size of a pea.²
4. My memory is a little cloudy.³

Everyone has *a personality*, so speakers' words do not seem to convey anything new but rather they sound redundant. No brain can literally be the size of a pea. Memories cannot be cloudy, as they cannot be overcast or covered with clouds; this quality can only be applied to weather, not to a mental faculty. And what does it mean to *wikify* something? The verb *wikify* is a creative use of the speaker but its meaning does not appear in any dictionary.

However, hearers seem to understand them without problem. The question is how do hearers interpret speaker's meaning in examples (1)-(4)? Obviously, decoding the concepts these words encode is not enough to interpret the speaker's meaning; there is a gap between the concepts encoded by the words *personality*, *pea* and *cloudy*, and the concepts communicated by the speaker in (1)-(3). In (4) there is no concept encoded by the word *wikify*, as it is a neologism. Thus, some type of inferential process is needed to cover the gap between sentence meaning and the speaker's meaning.

When analysing the relation between encoded meaning and words, RT states that most meanings encoded by words have to be contextually specified. The same word can express many different meanings without all of them being stable in the mind. For instance, the word *open* can be used to convey the meaning of uncork a bottle (as in *open the bottle*), of open the lid of a machine (as in *open the washing machine*), of unfold (as in *open a book*), of parting the lips (as in *open the mouth*), or of creating a company (as in *open a business*).

Hence, this approach considers that the mappings between concepts and words are neither exhaustive (as not every word corresponds to a concept and vice versa) nor exact but partial. The concepts used in our thinking are much more flexible, richer and varied than the lexical concepts encoded by words. Thus, most mental concepts do not map onto words. Words only seem to be pointers to the concepts involved in the speaker's meaning (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 3-7).

¹ This example has been drawn from the webpage <http://www.wordspy.com/words/wikification.asp>.

² This example has been drawn from the webpage <http://www.yourdictionary.com/grammar/examples/examples-of-hyperboles.html>.

³ This example has been drawn from the webpage http://knowgramming.com/metaphors/metaphor_chapters/metaphor_examples-sensory.htm.

2. Lexical processes of meaning adjustment

The decoded meaning of a word in an utterance provides a point of departure for an inferential process of meaning construction. According to RT, there are two main ways in which the concept communicated by the use of a word may differ from the one encoded: narrowing and broadening⁴, which correspond to the two types of lexical-pragmatic processes that take place during comprehension. Those two processes often combine, as one narrows and the other one extends the meaning of the linguistically-encoded concept resulting in an ad hoc concept (Carston, 2002; Wilson, 2008; Wilson & Carston, 2006; Wilson & Carston, 2007).

The meaning constructed may be narrower than the decoded meaning, as in (6) or (7):

5. I have a temperature.
6. *Peter*: Does Gérard like eating?
Mary: He's French!

In (5), *temperature* would be understood as meaning a temperature above normal. What the speaker is communicating would be false if her temperature were a regular 37°C. In (6), what Mary means is not just that Gérard is a French national, but that he is what she regards as a prototypical Frenchman, and therefore someone who likes eating.

On other occasions, the meaning constructed may be broader than the decoded meaning, as in (7)-(11):

7. Holland is flat.
8. The stones form a circle.
9. (*On a picnic, pointing to a flattish rock*): That's a table!
10. (*Handing someone a tissue*): Here's a Kleenex.
11. (*Handing someone a paper napkin*): Here's a Kleenex.

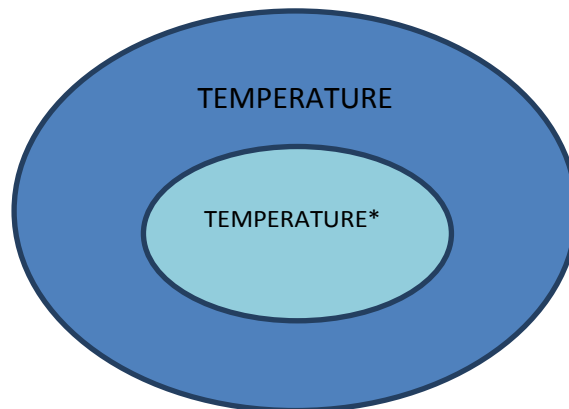
The uses of *flat* in (7) and *circle* in (8) are cases of approximation. **Approximation** is a variety of loose use or broadening in which a word with a relatively strict sense is extended to an item that strictly speaking falls outside its linguistically-specified denotation. The uses of *table* in (9) and "Kleenex" in (10) and (11) are cases of **category extension**. Category extension, another variety of loose use or broadening, involves extending a word with a relatively precise sense to a range of items that clearly fall outside its linguistically-specified denotation, but that share some contextually relevant properties with items inside the denotation. Thus, the flat rock referred to in (9) is definitely not a table, but has properties which make it a good substitute for a table on that occasion. The tissue referred to in (10) is not a Kleenex,

⁴ There is a third lexical process which is usually acknowledged within the field of lexical pragmatics: approximation. However, within RT this process is grouped together with broadening, as it is considered a type of broadening.

but will do just as well. The paper napkin referred to in (11) is not even a tissue, but is the closest available thing to a tissue, and will do almost as well.

With narrowing or enrichment, literalness is in some sense preserved: a high temperature is literally a temperature, and a Frenchman who likes eating is literally a Frenchman. With broadening, literalness is not preserved: Holland is not literally flat, the stones do not literally form a circle, the flattish rock is not literally a table, and neither the tissue nor the paper napkin is literally a Kleenex. However, **narrowing (or enrichment) and broadening** are not two functionally distinct types of language use. They both involve the same process of meaning construction, which happens in some cases to lead to a narrowing of the encoded concept, and in other cases to a broadening (Sperber & Wilson, 2006: 11-15).

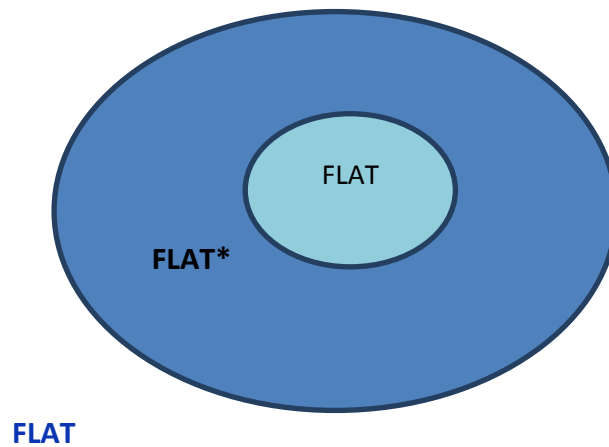
How are these narrowed or broadened lexical meanings arrived at? With (5) (“I have a temperature”), a literal interpretation based on the decoded meaning of *temperature* would be irrelevant, since anyone has a temperature. Rather, what happens is that the concept TEMPERATURE is activated in the hearer’s mind and points him towards a relevant interpretation. This concept can take a range of values, some of which would be relevant in the circumstances (by implying, for instance, that the speaker is ill and unable to work). In the process of arriving at a relevant overall interpretation of the utterance, the decoded concept TEMPERATURE provides a starting point for constructing a narrowed *ad hoc* concept TEMPERATURE* which ranges only over temperatures which depart from the human norm in a way that is easily brought to.



TEMPERATURE

Similarly, activation of the lexicalized concept FLAT in (7) (“Holland is flat”) gives access to a range of implications that would follow from Holland’s being strictly flat: that it is a good place for easy cycling or not a good place for mountaineering, for instance. These implications hold even if Holland is only approximately flat. In a context where (7) is relevant, some of these implications will be immediately obvious to the hearer, and will fulfil his expectations of relevance. The resulting overall interpretation (including the presumption of relevance and the implications that make the utterance relevant) will be internally consistent on the assumption that *flat* in (7) indicates the speaker’s intention to convey that Holland is FLAT*, where the *ad hoc* concept FLAT*

represents an approximation to flatness which is close enough to yield the implications that make the whole utterance contextually relevant (Wilson & Sperber, 2002).



In this case, the denotation of the *ad hoc* concept FLAT* includes all the entities denoted by the encoded concept plus a range of other cases (i.e. all strict flatness along with other shapes that deviate to some limited degree from strict flatness). However, the denotation of the *ad hoc* concept FLAT* might include some cases of strict flatness while excluding others. If so, the relation between FLAT and FLAT* is reflected in the following diagram:

In these two examples, the words *temperature* and *flat* are used in an utterance to evoke (or, more technically, to activate) potential implications of the encoded concepts TEMPERATURE or FLAT. In the case of narrowing, the implications hold across only part of the extension of the encoded concept (e.g. only some temperatures imply illness). In the case of broadening, the implications hold not only of items in the extension of the encoded concept but also of contextually salient items which fall outside the extension, but which share with items inside the extension properties that determine these implications (e.g. cycling is easy not only in flat, but also in flattish terrains).

Some of the implications evoked by the presence of a word are simultaneously evoked by the context. In (10) and (11) ("Here's a Kleenex," said of a tissue or a paper napkin), the implication *It can be used to blow one's nose* is activated in the hearer's mind not only by the word "Kleenex" but by the fact that he has just been sneezing. Implications activated by both the utterance and the context are the first to come to mind, and are tentatively added to the interpretation until the hearer's expectations of relevance are satisfied. At that point, the explicit content of the utterance is retroactively determined by mutually adjusting the implicit and explicit components of the interpretation. The explicatures of an utterance must be such that, together with the implicit premises of the utterance, they warrant the derivation of its implicit conclusions (where both implicit premises and implicit conclusions are kinds of implicature) (Sperber & Wilson, 2005; Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber 2002, 2004.)

In the case of (5) (“I have a temperature”), the result of the mutual adjustment process is a contextual construal of “temperature” as TEMPERATURE*, which is narrower than the lexicalized concept TEMPERATURE. In the case of (7) (“Holland is flat”), the result is a contextual construal of “flat” as FLAT*, which is broader than the lexicalized concept FLAT. Narrowings and broadenings of meaning are thus arrived at by exactly the same procedure of online concept construction.

Strictly literal interpretations – those that involve neither narrowing nor broadening of the lexicalized concept – are arrived at by exactly the same process of mutually adjusting explicit content with implicit content. A literal interpretation results when the implications that make the utterance relevant depend on the presence in the explicit content of the lexicalized concept itself (rather than some broadening or narrowing of it). Literal interpretations are not default interpretations: they are not the first to be considered.

3. Metaphor, loose talk and *ad hoc* concepts

The proposition expressed by a metaphorical utterance or some other kind of loose use serves as an effective and efficient means of giving the hearer access to the communicated assumptions (Carston, 2002: 157). Consider the following utterance:

12. Jane is my anchor in the storm.

The proposition expressed by the metaphor in (12) involves predicating of Jane a property (of being an anchor) which the speaker does not literally believe holds of her. The only explicature communicated by the utterance is the high-level one in (1b), where the proposition expressed is embedded in a generic speech-act description, which does not entail speaker endorsement. What is communicated is a range of weak implicatures concerning the role Jane plays in the speaker’s life; the conceptual structure encoded by the phrase *my anchor in the storm* gives the hearer immediate access to a range of other properties associated with anchors in storms and encourages him to select some subset of those that can be predicated of a human being: say, reliable and stable when life gets difficult, helpful in calming the speaker when she is disturbed, preventing her from being *swept off course*, etc. It is indeterminate exactly which of these the speaker implicated, but it is clear that she intended the hearer to recover some such assumptions within a constrained range of possibilities. The speaker may have had no specific individual assumptions in mind but rather a complex and probably ineffable concept of Jane’s significance in her life. The hearer has to take some responsibility for the specific propositions he recovers in interpreting the utterance.

There is a **continuum of cases between approximations**, such as (7) and (8), and **hyperboles**. Consider (13)-(14):

13. I am not drinking tonight.
14. It was so cold I saw polar bears wearing jackets.

In (13)-(14), the speaker does not explicate the proposition literally expressed, that is:

- 13a. The speaker will not drink any alcohol tonight.
- 14a. It was much colder than desired or expected.

The property encoded in the predicate gives access to a range of properties predicated of the subject. In (13a), the speaker will not drink any alcohol tonight, the speaker will drink non-alcoholic drinks, the speaker has to drive, etc. In (14a), it is much colder than expected or desired, it is cold to an unbearable degree, it is even cold for polar bears, etc. These implicatures are stronger than the implicatures communicated by the metaphor in (12) which requires more searching on the part of the hearer, more processing effort, but also more cognitive (poetic) effects. Thus, Sperber & Wilson argue that loose talk, metaphor and hyperbole are routes to achieve optimal relevance by mutual adjustment of the context and the cognitive effects.

There is a **continuum of cases between hyperbole and metaphor**. It might seem at first that hyperbole involves only a quantitative difference between the concept encoded and the concept contextually constructed, as in (15) below, while metaphor also involves a qualitative difference, as in (16):

15. Joan is the kindest person on earth.
16. Joan is an angel.

However, the quantitative/qualitative distinction is not sharp. For instance, (15) and (16) would generally be classified as hyperboles rather than metaphors. In any case, whether they are classified as hyperboles or metaphors, (15) and (16) would be interpreted in the same way: the encoded concept helps to activate contextual implications that make the utterance relevant as expected, and the concept conveyed by the hyperbole/metaphor is one of an outstanding type of kindness characterised by these implications.

There is also a **continuum of cases between category extension and metaphor**. It might be argued that category extension involves the projection of characteristic properties of the encoded concept onto a broader category, as in (9-11), whereas the type of broadening involved in metaphor is based on relatively peripheral properties, as in (17):

17. My mind is cloudy.

In (17), the difficulty of discerning parts is not a defining property of clouds. However, some metaphors are based on fairly central properties of the lexicalized category. For instance, when the term for an animal body part is extended to a human body part, as in (18), the result would generally be classified as a metaphor:

18. Henry was proud of his mane.

A category may undergo successive broadenings, with more peripheral extensions necessarily losing some of the most central features of the lexicalized category.

Central and peripheral properties may combine, as in (19), a comment on a clip of George W. Bush allegedly wiping his glasses on an unsuspecting woman's shirt during an appearance on Jay Leno's TV show:

19. We're all human Kleenex to him.

Here, the woman is implicitly described as a Kleenex, since she (or at least her clothes) can be used as one, and this carries the suggestion that Bush sees people as disposable artefacts with little value.

Most hyperboles involve only broadening of the encoded concept, with no narrowing. In (15), for instance, "the kindest person on earth" is broadened to cover all very kind people, including Joan. By contrast, most metaphors involve both narrowing and broadening, and so cannot be seen simply as cases of category extension. In the metaphorical (16), *angel* is interpreted as ANGEL*, which is narrowed, on the one hand, to cover only prototypical, caring angels (excluding avenging angels, angels of wrath or fallen angels) and broadened, on the other, to cover all very kind, caring people. However, this combination of narrowing and broadening is not a defining feature of metaphor. In the metaphorical (19), for instance, *Kleenex* is broadened to something like the category of DISPOSABLE ITEMS, and this includes not only prototypical Kleenex but all Kleenex.

3.1. The interpretation process

Let us look in more detail at how this procedure applies to the interpretation of metaphors, as in example (20):

20. This surgeon is a butcher.

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Table 1. Peter's interpretation process

(a) S has said <i>This surgeon is a butcher.</i>	<i>Decoding of S's utterance.</i>
(b) S's utterance is optimally relevant to H.	<i>Expectation raised by the recognition of S's utterance as a communicative act. Presumption of relevance.</i>
(c) S's utterance will achieve relevance by qualifying the surgeon S refers to.	<i>Expectation raised by (b).</i>
(d) Surgeons are doctors who perform operations that involve cutting live flesh carefully to remove diseased parts & to avoid severing blood vessels, nerves or tendons, causing irreparable damage.	<i>Assumption activated both by the use of "surgeon". Accepted as an implicit premise of S's utterance.</i>
(e) Butcher (in encoded sense of the term, BUTCHER) cut dead flesh to produce meat for cooking; no restriction on how much should be cut.	<i>Assumption activated both by the use of the word "butcher". Accepted as an implicit premise of S's utterance.</i>
(f) A surgeon who treats flesh as a butcher is grossly incompetent and dangerous.	<i>Implicit conclusion derivable from (d) & (e), together with an appropriate interpretation of S's utterance, which would make her utterance relevant-as-expected.</i>
(g) S's surgeon is a BUTCHER* (where BUTCHER* is a meaning suggested by the use of the word <i>butcher</i> in the sense of BUTCHER and enabling the derivation of (e)).	<i>Interpretation of the explicit content of Mary's utterance as decoded in (a) which, together with (d) and (e), would imply (f).</i>
(h) S's surgeon is a BUTCHER*, denoting a doctor who treats flesh in the way butchers do.	<i>First overall interpretation of S's utterance (explicit content plus implicatures) to occur to H which would satisfy the expectation of relevance in (b). Accepted as S's meaning.</i>

What this utterance evokes is the idea that the surgeon in question is grossly incompetent, dangerous, and so on. Surgeons and butchers both characteristically cut flesh, but in quite different ways. Surgeons cut live flesh; they cut as little as possible, and with the utmost care to avoid unnecessarily severing blood vessels, nerves or tendons, thus causing irreparable damage. Butchers cut dead flesh to produce pieces of meat for cooking; this places no principled restriction on how much should be cut (or minced, broken, pounded, etc.), and puts a premium on severing nerves, tendons, and other hard tissues. So a surgeon who treats flesh as a butcher does would indeed be grossly incompetent and dangerous. The inferential path to an adequate understanding of (20) involves an evocation of the way butchers treat flesh, and the construction on that basis of an ad hoc concept BUTCHER*, denoting people who treat flesh in the way butchers do. Practically all butchers and (one hopes) very few surgeons fall within the extension of this concept. For a butcher, being a BUTCHER* is a quasi-redundant property. For a surgeon, on the other hand, it does imply gross

incompetence. Example (20) involves emergent properties that are particularly easy to analyse in inferential terms.

As we can see, the interpretation process for literal and non-literal language is the same (see subheading 4.3.2.3. from Unit 4). The interpretation is carried out *on line*, and starts while the utterance is still in progress. This shows that interpretive hypotheses about explicit content and implicatures are developed partly in parallel rather than in sequence, and stabilise when they are mutually adjusted so as to jointly confirm the hearer's expectations of relevance.

3.2. Poetic effects

Optimal relevance may be achieved by an utterance with a few strong implications, many weak implications, or any combination of weak and strong implications. A speaker aiming at relevance may implicate a few strong implicatures or a wide range of weak implicatures. There are many ways of achieving relevance, which differ in both the strength of the implications conveyed and the strength with which they are implicated. Let us see how relevance is achieved through a wide array of weak implications weakly implicated. The speaker—or writer, since this method of achieving relevance is particularly well developed in literature—has good reason to suppose that enough of a wide array of potential implications with similar import are true or probably true, although she does not know which these are (hence they are weak implications) and is neither able to anticipate nor particularly concerned with anticipating which of them will be considered and accepted by the audience (hence they are weakly implicated). The cognitive effects achieved by conveying such a wide range of weak implicatures are identifiable as **poetic effects** (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Pilkington, 2000).

The production of genuinely relevant poetic effects can be a powerfully creative form of language use (creative on the part of both communicator and audience). Effects of this type may be created by literal, loose, or metaphorical forms of expression. Thus, classical Japanese haikus, which are among the most effective forms of poetry in world literature, typically involve a literal use of language. Consider Bashō's famous haiku (written in 1680):

On a leafless bough
A crow is perched –
The autumn dusk.

(Translated by Joan Giroux, 1974)

This simple, literal description weakly implicates a wide array of implications which combine to depict a landscape, a season, a moment of the day, a mood, and so on, thereby achieving a powerful overall effect which varies to some extent from reader to reader.

Although metaphors are not necessary for the creation of genuine poetic effects, they are particularly well suited to this purpose, for several reasons. Consider, first, a trivial case of metaphor such as (21):

21. *Woman to uncouth suitor: Keep your paws off me!*

Here, *your paws* refers to the hearer's hands. Use of the word *paws* also activates related notions and images having to do with animal paws, clumsiness, bestiality, and so on. While there is a wide range of possible implicatures which might contribute to the relevance of the utterance (that the hearer is clumsy, gross, acting like a beast, and so on), none of them is strongly implicated by the speaker. They are weakly implicated: the hearer is indeed encouraged to consider at least some of them and see them as part of the speaker's meaning. It is these vague effects that make the use of *paws* marginally more relevant than the use of *hands*. In processing (21), the hearer develops (in parallel) interpretations of the explicit and implicit components of the speaker's meaning, and stops when they fit together in the sense that the explicit content contextually implies the implicated conclusions and satisfy the hearer's expectations of relevance. The ad hoc concepts constructed to carry these implications will then at least overlap with the concepts encoded by the utterance (Sperber & Wilson, 2006).

S & W assume that the ad hoc concepts built on the basis of most metaphorical terms are genuinely ad hoc: that is, they are adjusted to the precise circumstances of their use, and are therefore unlikely to be paraphrasable by an ordinary language expression. The weak implications of (21) are weakly intended by the speaker. The utterance on this interpretation achieves optimal relevance by making a strong explicit request that the hearer remove his PAWS*, and weakly implicating that he is behaving clumsily and grossly. Note that PAW*, so construed, involves both a broadening and a narrowing of PAW, as do most ad hoc meanings conveyed by metaphorical uses.

So even a common metaphor such as "Keep your paws off me!" achieves some of its relevance through an array of weak implicatures: a poetic touch, however modest. In more creative metaphors, relevance may depend to a much greater extent (or even entirely) on such weak implicatures, in a way that makes it quite appropriate to talk of *poetic effects*. Consider the full version of Carl Sandburg's poem "Fog", whose first two lines are one of the most widely quoted examples of creative metaphor:

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

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On little cat feet evokes an array of implications having to do with silence, smoothness, stealth. Taken together with the following four lines, the phrase evokes a movement which appears both arbitrary and yet composed. Poems are read and re-read. On a second reading, the interpretation of the whole poem provides part of the context in which the first two lines are understood. Not unlike Bashō's literal haiku quoted above, Sandburg's extended metaphor weakly implicates an ever-widening array of implications which combine to depict a place, an atmosphere, a mood, achieving a powerful overall effect that varies from reader to reader and reading to reading. It is not part of the explicit content of the poem that the fog comes silently, or smoothly, or stealthily. Rather, what is part of the explicit content is that the fog comes ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET*. How is this ad hoc concept ON-LITTLE-CAT-FEET* arrived at? By taking the poet to be attributing to the coming of the fog that property which contextually implies the very ideas suggested by the phrase "little cat feet."

The effort required for ad hoc concept construction calls for matching effects, and given the freedom left to the interpreter in the construction process, these effects are unlikely to consist in just a few strongly implicated strong implications. It is not that concept construction systematically demands more effort in the case of metaphors (Noveck et al. 2001). Many metaphors are very easy to process, while, as any student knows, arriving at an adequate literal understanding of a statement may take much more effort than a loose or even a metaphorical construal. Nor is it that literal expression is intrinsically less capable than metaphor of achieving poetic effects, as the comparison between Bashō's haiku and Sandburg's haiku-like poem shows. It is just that, on the whole, the closer one gets to the creative metaphor, the greater the freedom of interpretation left to hearers or readers, and the more likely it is that relevance will be achieved through a wide array of weak implicatures, i.e. through poetic effects.

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