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NOTES AND DISCUSSION

Synonyms and syntax[1]

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Recent work in a variety of different theoretical traditions has tended to emphasize the close match between syntax and semantics (Dixon 1991; Langacker 1987, 1990, 1995; Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1991, 1992; Wierzbicka 1988). It is very easy to be left with the impression that, if only we could analyse the relevant syntactic and semantic structures correctly, this match would be total. The following are fairly typical statements:

The picture that emerges is that a verb's behavior arises from the interaction of its meaning and general principles of grammar. Thus the lexical knowledge of a speaker of a language must include knowledge of the meaning of individual verbs, the meaning components that determine the syntactic behavior of verbs, and the general principles that determine behavior from verb meaning. (Levin 1993: 11)

Grammar is not semantically arbitrary. On the contrary, grammatical distinctions are motivated (in the synchronic sense) by semantic distinctions; every grammatical construction is a vehicle of a certain semantic structure; and this is its raison d'être, and the criterion determining its range of use. For example, if English has a number of different complement constructions, associated with complementizers such as *that*, *ing*, *to* and *for to*, the choice between these complement constructions is neither arbitrary nor determined by some formal, non-semantic constraints, but is predictable from the intended meaning... In every case... the syntactic possibilities are determined by the underlying semantic structures (that is, by the intended meaning). (Wierzbicka 1988: 3–4)

We share the general enthusiasm for the success scored so far, but (with Fillmore 1986; Jackendoff 1993 and others) we also believe that there is an

[1] We should like to acknowledge the helpful comments that we received via the editors from Fritz Newmeyer and two others.

irreducible residue of cases which can never be explained. The purpose of this note is to document some of the clearest examples from English that we know (some of which are already well-known but deserve to be repeated).

What all our examples have in common is that they involve pairs of SYNONYMS (we comment on this notion below) which are syntactically different. Such cases deserve attention as the limiting case at one end of the spectrum of possible relations between syntax and semantics: if these two levels always match perfectly, in the sense that syntactic behaviour can always be predicted from semantics, then surely words which share the same semantics should also have identical syntax.

For example, if *likely* and *probable* are synonymous, then they should have the same valency (subcategorization), but this is not so: *likely* allows a TO-infinitive with subject-to-subject raising, but *probable* does not:

(1) (a) It's likely/probable that he'll be late.
(b) He's likely/*probable to be late.

Of course the argument could be reversed: if they are syntactically different, they can't really be synonyms. However so long as the relations between syntax and semantics are a matter of empirical debate this argument works only as a heuristic for drawing attention to semantic differences which remain to be discovered and which may or may not exist. Not only do the putative differences need to be demonstrated independently, but even more importantly, they must also be such as to explain the syntactic differences. (For example, we might explain the difference between *eat* and *dine* by saying that the latter means 'eat dinner', where the 'food' slot is already filled and therefore no longer available for filling by a syntactic object.) It is not enough to show that one of the words can be used in a way which is not possible for the other, unless this helps to explain the syntactic facts. Less still is it sufficient to show that the words are stylistically different (e.g. that *probable* belongs to a higher, more formal style, than *likely*) unless this difference explains the syntactic difference. And most obviously of all, perhaps, 'total usages' are irrelevant: for example, although *try*, but not *attempt*, can be used in *I tried the soup*, this fact is irrelevant to the use of these verbs with an infinitival complement.

In short, the theoretical status of synonymy is not at issue; our data are still relevant to theories of the syntax-semantics interface even if our putative synonyms turn out to be subtly different in style or even in referential meaning. Our case is that the examples at least seem to be synonymous, so the onus is on those who think otherwise not only to demonstrate the differences of meaning but also to show why the syntactic differences follow from them.

Our examples also raise interesting questions of learnability if syntactic patterns are supposed to be learned by SEMANTIC BOOTSTRAPPING, because in

these cases the bootstraps clearly don't work. For example, a child who knows that *likely* allows raising would be wrong to assume that the same is also true for *probable*. The learnability question in this case is how the child comes to know that raising is impossible for *probable*, a 'negative' fact which appeared at one time to require 'negative' evidence (Hudson 1972). Two decades later things look rather different. We now have a clear choice between two views on the relation between syntax and semantics, each implying a very different view of language learning. If syntactic behaviour is reliably predictable from meaning, *probable* should behave in the same way as *likely*, so the child does indeed need evidence for any difference. But if syntax is unpredictable, the behaviour of *likely* is irrelevant to that of *probable* and all the child needs is positive examples of each word.

Learnability, then, is not a major issue here. We believe that we have a plausible explanation for how children can learn the syntactic differences between each of our pairs of synonyms, and in each case the learning will turn out to be based only on positive experience (even though it would have been possible to formulate the difference negatively as 'word X cannot be used in this way, although its synonym can'). However we should point out that the explanations all rest on a controversial assumption: 'strict lexical conservatism' (Pinker 1989: 17). Learners do seem to stick conservatively to the patterns for which they have positive evidence, without generalizing these patterns to other semantically similar lexical items – that is, in the present case, without generalizing them to synonyms.

We believe this principle is reasonable for the very minor patterns which we shall consider, even though it must be rejected (as Pinker shows) for some patterns that involve large number of lexemes. We assume that there is some threshold above which the evidence for a generalization is overwhelming, but that most of our examples are well below this threshold. (For example, only six other adjectives share *likely*'s ability to occur in sentences like *There is likely to be a discussion: apt, certain, due, liable, sure, unlikely.*[2]) The only apparent problem for this assumption is in the exceptional behaviour of words like *ill*, which can be used predicatively but not attributively (see example (18) below); given the hundreds of adjectives that can be used in either way, and our confidence in using new adjectives like *faxable* (*This is faxable; a faxable message*), it is very odd that any adjectives are restricted only to one use. However, we shall suggest that the words concerned may not

[2] Interestingly, the pattern of LIKELY and UNLIKELY does not even extend to the negatives UNCERTAIN and UNSURE. According to Carlson & Roeper (1980: 123), 'addition of prefixes to verbs rules out non-nominal complements', so we might try to explain the absence of UNCERTAIN and UNSURE by generalizing this principle to adjectives. Unfortunately this would not work because UNLIKELY does allow a raising infinitive complement. This difference between UNLIKELY and the other two looks like a genuine example of arbitrary differences in syntactic valency.

in fact be adjectives, in which case the problem is transformed into a different one.

The following is our list of examples. If the words in each pair do have different meanings, these differences are too small to explain the syntactic differences; and some pairs are plausible candidates for true synonymy. The classic statement of the contrary view is Wierzbicka (1988), which argues for the non-synonymy of the pairs *likely/probable* (55–59), *try/attempt* (309), *stop/cease* (79–81), and *want/wish* (164, 166); her arguments rest on subtle judgements about the meaning of individual examples which we do not share. In any case, it is hard to see how the alleged meaning differences could be learned except on the basis of the syntactic differences that they are meant to explain, so the arguments are dangerously circular. We have cast our net as wide as possible so as to include a broad range of syntactic differences which go well beyond matters of valency and argument structure. They also include grammatical function, modifier selection, and word order. We have classified them on this basis.

A. Valency differences

In all the examples in this section, learners must be sensitive to valency differences that involve syntactic or lexical patterns (raising or non-raising, bare infinitive or *to* + optional infinitive, optional or obligatory complement, different inflected verb forms, bare NP or PP, and specific preparations).

- *Likely, probable.* As noted already, *likely* allows a raising *to*-infinitive but *probable* does not (see (1)).

- *Try, attempt.* The *to* complement is optional with *try* but obligatory with *attempt* (Gazdar et al. 1985: 32). In contrast, the verb after *TO* is of course always optional, regardless of the higher verb.

(2) You may not be able to finish it, but please try/*attempt.
(3) You may not be able to finish it, but please try/attempt to.

- *Should, ought.* One takes a bare infinitive while the other takes *to*:

(4) We should/*ought go now.
(5) We ought/*should to go now.

- *Let, allow.* As for *should, ought.*

(6) He let/*allowed the rope go slack.
(7) He allowed/*let the rope to go slack.

- *Stop, cease.* With intransitive *stop* the complement is a present participle, but with *cease* it is either *to* or a present participle.

(8) It stopped/ceased raining.
(9) It ceased/*stopped to rain.

• *Want, wish.* These verbs both allow a small clause, but only *want* allows this to be headed by a passive participle:

(10) I want/*wish the fire lit.

• *Wait, await.* Here the choice is between a bare NP and a *for*-phrase. Similarly for other pairs such as *yearn/long, crave.*

(11) I waited/*awaited for her.
(12) I awaited/*waited her.

• *Keen, enthusiastic.* The complement preposition is ON after KEEN but ABOUT after *enthusiastic.*

(13) They were keen/*enthusiastic on her music.
(14) They were enthusiastic/*keen about her music.

• *Able, capable.* One takes *to*+infinitive, the other *of*+NP (or gerund):

(15) He is able/*capable to work hard.
(16) He is capable/*able of hard work/working hard.

B. Grammatical function

These cases involve two clearly distinct grammatical functions, modifier of a noun and predicative complement of a copula verb; what we have to learn is which words can be used with each function. As mentioned earlier, the restrictions are hard to explain if the words concerned really do belong to the same word class, but the distinctions to be learned may in fact involve word class membership rather than function as such, as will be explained below.

• *Sick, ill, poorly, unwell.* The last three are normally used only predicatively, whereas the first can be used either attributively (as modifier of a noun) or predicatively. Similarly for other pairs such as *living – alive, frightened – afraid* and *sleeping – asleep* (Quirk et al. 1985: 403, 432).

(17) The child was sick/ill/poorly/unwell.
(18) A sick/?ill/*poorly/*unwell child was lying in the bed.

One way to explain the distributional differences is to assign the words to different wordclasses; in this case the words which can only be used predicatively are not exceptional adjectives but members of some other word class. If this is right, the mismatch between syntax and semantics shifts from distribution to classification: synonyms need not belong to the same word class. (As far as *alive, afraid* and *asleep* are concerned, the word class differences may be supported by the word's morphology, alerting the learner to a special word class.) There are plenty of precedents for this analysis (for example, the pairs *may – perhaps* and *explode – explosion* are arguably synonyms from different wordclasses), but they all stand or fall together as

part of a more general theoretical package whose merits are still being debated.[3] The alternative is to assign *sick* and its synonyms to the same word-class, which raises an equally challenging theoretical question about their different distributions.

C. Modifier selection

Degree modifiers are often selected lexically – for example, *stark naked*, *blind drunk*, *need... badly* – but the case discussed here is rather special in that it is a matter of whether or not a degree modifier is possible at all. Once again the solution seems to lie in reclassifying the words, though in this case both the synonyms are assigned to the same class.

• *Nearly*, *almost*. One allows *very*, but the other does not allow any degree modifier.

(19) I very nearly/*almost forgot my appointment.

At first sight this difference is very surprising, as *very*, like other degree modifiers, generally combines freely with any degree adverb. However, Larry Trask has pointed out (p.c.) that *nearly* and *almost* are not degree words or even adverbs, but belong to a small class of words which includes *just*, *only* and *even*. In general these words do not allow any modification at all, so contrary to first appearances what has to be learned is the positive fact that *nearly* can take *very*, rather than the negative fact that *almost* cannot. This interpretation also explain why *very* is almost the only word that can be used in this way (as witness the badness of **so/too/that nearly*). Interestingly, the badness of **very almost* came to our attention when we heard it used by a small child, who must later have recognised this as a guess based on false premises because she no longer uses the pattern at all.

D. Word order

• *Also*, *too*, *as well*. When these words are used to mean 'also' they have to be used in different positions: roughly, *also* generally precedes the focus, but *too* and *as well* have to follow it.

(20) It rained also/too/as well.
(21) It also/*too/*as well rained.

[3] One anonymous referee comments as follows: 'surely no-one would claim that there is a systematic mapping from meaning to syntactic category...'. This is not in fact true, as witness the following quotation from Langacker (1987: 189):

> Counter to received wisdom, I claim that basic grammatical categories such as 'noun', 'verb', 'adjective' and 'adverb' are semantically definable... All [sic] members of a given class share fundamental semantic properties,...

• *Enough, sufficiently.* As everyone knows, these are used on opposite sides of the word modified:

(22) He isn't tall enough/*sufficiently.
(23) He isn't sufficiently/*enough tall.

The examples discussed here illustrate the following types of differences between synonyms:

(24) (a) different syntactic valency patterns among their dependents (including their degree modifiers),
(b) different functions that they themselves can have,
(c) different classification in terms of word classes,
(d) different word order restrictions.

The general conclusion that we draw is that syntax has some degree of autonomy in relation to semantics, although in the vast majority of cases the two are in step. The minority of mismatches are sufficient to show that we are capable of learning purely syntactic facts, unaided by semantics (or even in spite of the semantics), and of storing these facts in competence.

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