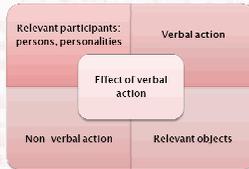


Contexts of situation in text, in experience, and in the mind

 Gill Philip – University of Macerata

Firth's context of situation

Although Firth's *context of situation* (1957: 181) is considered to be one of the basic tenets of corpus linguistics, its connection with the more ubiquitous concepts of collocation and colligation is rarely, if ever, made explicit. Yet the collocates and colligates which are found in text allow us to identify the participants and objects, their relevant features, and the presence of any verbal and/ or non-verbal action accompanying the node being examined.



The purpose of this poster is to show how the principal components of Firth's context of situation map onto the collocates, colligates, semantic preferences and semantic prosodies which together form Sinclair's (1996) unit of meaning. It also introduces a less-familiar frame of reference for linguistic analysis, the *metaphoreme* (Cameron & Deignan, 2006), which outlines how metaphorical meanings are represented in text and elaborated in the mind.

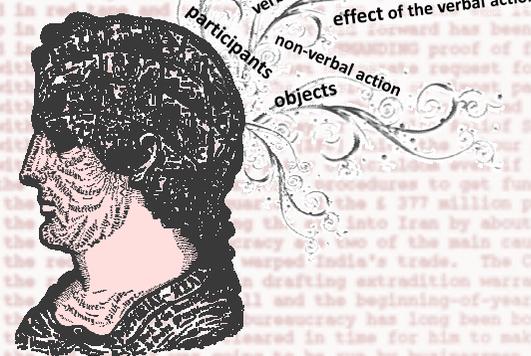
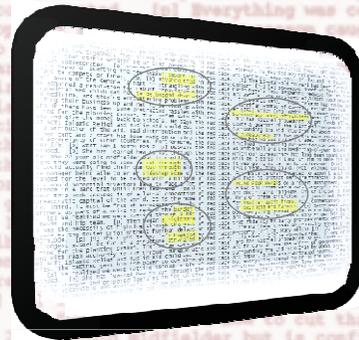
It is important to remember that meaning does not exist only in instantiation: language users accumulate within their memories all sorts of previous encounters with words and phrases. Remembered meanings interact with instantiated meanings, allowing creative forms to take flight and meaning to be enriched as remembered meanings resonate through to the present.

My view was, and still is, that 'context of situation' is best used as a suitable schematic construct to apply to language events, and that it is a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature. A context of situation for linguistic work brings into relation the following categories:

- A. The relevant features of participants: persons, personalities.
 - (i) The verbal action of the participants.
 - (ii) The non-verbal action of the participants.
- B. The relevant objects.
- C. The effect of the verbal action.

JR. Firth (1957: 182)

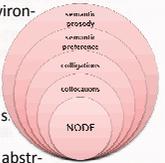
Contexts of situation and types of language function can then be grouped and classified.



Units of meaning & metaphoremes

It is possible to identify the *persons, personalities and objects* relevant to the meaning of a node by examining concordances.

The **unit of meaning** maps out the linguistic environment of a node in ever-increasing abstraction. Recurring collocates provide concrete evidence of co-occurrence, while colligation is the co-occurrence of grammatical categories, themselves abstract categories, realised by a range of different word forms.



Semantic preference, the third level in Sinclair's model, does not in fact operate at a higher level of abstraction – it merely deals with semantics rather than grammar. However it is worth noting that the semantic sets which emerge through corpus analysis do not always conform to the traditional taxonomies discussed in theoretical semantics. The final level in Sinclair's model semantic prosody, one of the most intensely-debated categories in linguistics, which describes the pragmatic and affective aspects of the language under study. The link with the "effect of the verbal action" should be evident.

Metaphoremes "combine specific lexical and grammatical form with specific conceptual content and with specific affective value and pragmatics" (Cameron & Deignan 2006:674). Although a relatively recent addition to the descriptive inventory, and likely to be unfamiliar to most corpus linguists, the basis of metaphoremes lies in corpus-based metaphor analysis. It is unsurprising, therefore, that parallels can be drawn between "specific lexical and grammatical form" and collocation/ colligation. Similar too is the recognition that metaphoremes have "specific affective value and pragmatics", i.e. the effect of the verbal action / semantic prosody: this aspect of figurative language has been documented in corpus linguistics since the beginning of the COBUILD era (c.f. Hanks 1987, Moon 1992). But what is interesting and important to note is the introduction of "conceptual content" into this model. Concepts are activated in the mind, and their elaboration has a role in both in comprehension and production of metaphor, especially when unfamiliar. Exploiting standard concepts allows communicatively-successful creativity to happen.



Red tape: unit of meaning and metaphoreme(s)

Red tape has interesting meaning potential which is often realised in corpus data. *Red tape* is effectively a synonym for bureaucracy, and it is therefore inextricably linked with officialdom. Since *red tape* is typically perceived as excessive, it is typically mentioned when it has to be reduced, with *cut* appearing once in every 10 occurrences. *Red tape* also has a marked semantic preference for quantity.

Red tape is a classic example of a dead metaphor: after all, how often are stacks of official papers seen bound up in their pinkish-red ribbon?

The origin of the phrase, along with its mental picture, has largely disappeared. All dead metaphors have the potential to be resuscitated. What sets *red tape* apart is the degree to which it is subjected to semantic elaboration. Its component words are polysemous,

and more than one of the meanings of both are salient. Thus, if *red tape* is *cut* (bureaucracy reduced), then an image of actual tape being cut with a sharp instrument is not far behind. This is an initial *image schema* (Lakoff 1987) for the expression (a cognitive representation of language in the mind), and one from which stems a colourful array of variants. In the corpus we can find not only *cut* but also *chop*, *hack*, *slash*, synonyms which add nuanced meaning: indelicate and imprecise methods of cutting performed with large tools, suggestive of particularly tough, strong or otherwise resistant things being cut.

These variants start the creative ball rolling. Although they may occur in isolation (as the only change from the typical lexicogrammatical pattern), they frequently combine with expressions of quantity, these too deviating

from the basic pattern to add particular facets of meaning. As a result we can find:

Mr Lamont **slashed** through **heaps** of red tape.
There is a **mass** of red tape to **hack** down.
...**hacking** back the **jungle** of red tape.

When conceptual schemata interact, the result is richer and more complex meaning, which also has a more aesthetically pleasing effect. The examples above demonstrate how QUANTITY can be mapped onto hostile environments. The effect this has is to stimulate re-elaboration of the image schema, making it more detailed and, importantly, reviving its metaphorical potential.

Metaphor is not linear, and the directions it takes can sometimes be surprising. *Red tape* does not have just one conceptualisation, as the variants found in the corpus attest. Apart from quantity expressed as mass,

red tape is also associated with length. The more bureaucracy there is, the more paperwork accompanies it and the more red tape is required to bind it all together. But it is not just paper which is tied in *red tape* but people too. Long cords tangle, making it difficult to 'find the thread' – reflecting the often confusing nature of bureaucratic regulations. And from finding oneself 'caught in a tangle' of red tape to being 'snared', 'trussed', 'hogtied' or 'shackled' becomes simply a matter of degree.

So far two of the metaphoremes associated with red tape have been described: the reduction of a mass, and entrapment. But metaphors build on other metaphors. In the data studied, the entrapment metaphoreme is seen to be re-elaborated in turn into a 'kidnap' theme, which connects entrapment with suffocation (another minor metaphoreme present in the *red tape* data) and

other perceived threats to one's life:
Red tape **strangles** teddies.
Deregulation **chokes** on red tape.

The image schemas and conceptualisations discussed here are the more prominent of those found in the *red tape* data. Metaphorical processing is a very personal matter, but there is clear evidence that some conceptualisations are shared by the language community: the metaphoremes discussed come from a range of sources within the Bank of English corpus, were coined by different authors and offered to different audiences. Yet in spite of their creativity, all conform to the patterns identified for the unit of meaning, and express the same pragmatic and affective values. Although the features of the **participants and objects** are 'stretched' metaphorically, they remain in place, together with the **effect of the verbal action** in *red tape's* context of situation.



References

- Cameron, L. & A. Deignan. 2006. The emergence of metaphor in discourse. *Applied Linguistics* 27, 671-690.
- Firth, J.R. 1957. *Papers in Linguistics 1934-1951*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hanks, P. 1987. Definitions and explanations. In Sinclair (ed.) *Looking Up*, 116-137. London: Collins.
- Lakoff, G. 1987. Image metaphors. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 1 (3), 215-225.
- Moon, R. 1992. There is reason in the roasting of eggs. In Tommola et al. (eds) *Eurolex '92 Proceedings*, 493-502. Tampere: University of Tampere.
- Philip, G. 2011. *Colouring Meaning: collocation and annotation in figurative language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Sinclair, J.M. 1996. The search for units of meaning. *Textus* 9, 75-106. Reprinted in J.M. Sinclair, 2004, *Trust the Text: language, corpus and discourse*. London: Routledge, 24-48.