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 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.

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 abstractions. Recurring collocates provide concrete evidence of co-occurrence, while colligates mediate that co-occurrence. The occurrence of metaphoremes, themselves a category 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 probes, 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.

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 cut? Yet red tape is more than just a vivid, aesthetically pleasing effect. The examples above demonstrate how QUANTITY can be mapped onto fragile environments. The effect this has is to stimulate re-elaboration of the image scheme, making it more detailed and, importantly, revising 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 bureaucratic 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 and arduous, 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 “smashed”, “hacked”, “holed” or “choked”, 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 metaphorems build on other metaphorems. In the data studied, the entrapment metaphoreme is seen to be re-elaborated in turn into a “hacking” 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: entrapment (hacking back).

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 metaphorical conceptualisations are shared by the language community. The metaphoremes discussed came from a range of sources within the Bank of English corpus, as well as from 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


