Ambiguity at Work: Multistable Meaning Structures in Lexical Blending

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Structural overlap in lexical blends, i.e. when its source words share letters, is often described as a recurring characteristic of this word formation process (e.g. Beliaeva 2014, Gries 2006, Kelly 1998, Lehrer 2007). The rich semantic potential of overlap is exemplified in blends such as *testimoney* (testimony + money), *dragula* (drag + dracula), and *crooklyn* (crook + Brooklyn). The complex relation between source words of blends with overlap has been discussed from various viewpoints (cf. Beliaeva 2014, Gries 2006), but the dominance of structural analyses of source words means that conceptual perspectives and explanations await further investigation (cf. Bauer 2012, Gries 2012). There are two objectives of this presentation. First, it describes a data collection model and a methodology addressing the problem of how to retrieve lexical blends in a systematic manner. Second, it investigates semantic aspects of lexical ambiguity of the blends in the dataset.

Few previous studies give a transparent account of how the blends in the data have been collected, let alone present a systematic rationale motivating the employed procedures of retrieval. This study addresses this issue by designing a data collection model based on an offline version of the *News On the Web* corpus (NOW; https://corpus.byu.edu/now/ Retrieved 2019-02-19). A randomized set of 100 words among the 2000 most frequent common nouns in the corpus are truncated according to the rationale of their *selection point* (Gries 2006). These items are then the basis for corpus queries in a SQL script environment, which results in lists that have been analyzed manually so a to identify lexical blends.

The transparent and systematic dataset of the study not only enables descriptions of *semantic ambiguity* and *multistable meaning structures* as such, these phenomena are also related to the context of the corpus as a whole. Moreover, it can be shown how common a certain strategy is in the data, but it also allows for future investigations across other data sets. The semantic part of the study is oriented towards how lexical ambiguity is expressed and applied in the dataset. The example blends, *testimoney*, *dragula*, and *crooklyn*, illustrate how the sharing of structure creates a multistable form allowing both interpretations simultaneously. In addition, the data displays instances in which the semantic potential of seemingly unrelated concepts is activated on the basis of lexical frequency. For instance, in a blend such as *bodacious* (bold + audacious; https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bodacious Retrieved 2018-11-12) the presumed source words explain some of the usage data, while a recurring association with *sex* may seem coincidential. However, the data of this study reveals that an initial splinter *bod**, which is calculated using Gries' (2006) notion of selection point, produces *body* as the most frequent item in a corpus query. A concealed and ambiguous meaning potential is thus activated in *bodacious*, and the semantic richness of the blend is extended with interacting covert structures. In other words, the meaning of *bodacious* is understood as a multistable network of associations that draws its linguistic motivation from unresolved ambiguities.

References

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