ON CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENTIATION: THE CASE OF THE HUNGARIAN AND RUSSIAN VERBS MEANING 'CUT'

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1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical background

The present paper is set in the framework of **lexical pragmatics** [BIBOK 2004] which critically amalgamates the views of Two-level Conceptual Semantics [BIERWISCH 1983, 1996], Generative Lexicon Theory [PUSTEJOVSKY 1995] and Relevance Theory [SPERBER and WILSON 1995] concerning word meanings in utterances. Lexical pragmatics accepts, as a starting point in the construction of word meanings in utterances, lexical-semantic representations which can be underspecified and allow for methods other than componential analysis. Since words have underspecified meaning representations, they reach their full-fledged meanings in corresponding contexts through considerable pragmatic inference. One of these interpretation operations is what has been called conceptual differentiation, which originates from Two-level Conceptual Semantics but resembles mechanisms such as PUSTEJOVSKY's [1995] selective binding and CRUSE's [1986] contextual modulation. Conceptual differentiation modifies the underspecified meaning belonging to the linguistic level in slightly different ways within one and the same conceptual domain. The paper uses the notion of conceptual differentiation combining it with those of lexical stereotype and prototype.

1.2. Aims

I have one general and two specific goals in this paper. As to the **general** one, I aim to thoroughly investigate how conceptual differentiation, lexical stereotype and prototype co-operate in the lexical field of Hungarian and Russian verbs meaning 'cut' in order to construct their actual contextual meanings in utterances. With this general aim in mind, I **first** analyze such Hungarian verbs as *vág* 'cut', *nyír* 'cut through pressing/shearing/mowing', *fűrészel* 'saw' and *borotvál* 'shave'. The **second specific aim** is to compare the Hungarian verbs against their Russian counterparts, viz. *rezat'* 'cut through pressing', *rubit'* 'cut with a blow/blows', *strič'* 'cut through pressing/shearing/mowing', *pilit'* 'saw; file' and *brit'* 'shave'.

2. Hungarian verbs of cutting

2.1. The verb *vág* 'cut'

On the basis of a fairly wide range of contexts in which this word occurs, its core meaning can be paraphrased in non-formalized terms as follows:

(1)   'using a sharp-edged instrument, x (= a physical object) causes y (= a physical object) to become not whole'.

Objects to be cut evoke our everyday knowledge about the typical instruments as well as how and for what they are used:

(2) (a) cutting bread with a knife (the knife may move back and forth or only press down on the object to be cut),

(b) cutting wood with an axe or a saw (the axe hits wood, and the saw moves back and forth),

(c) cutting the hedge with hedging-shears,

(d) cutting grass with a scythe, a sickle or a lawn-mower,

(e) cutting one's hair with scissors or a hair-clipper,

(f) cutting one's nails with nail-scissors or a nail-trimmer (in the latter cases – in addition to becoming not whole – there can be special purposes: to shorten and/or to cut a shape), etc.

Non-typical cases of x's causing y to become not whole with a sharp-edged instrument which can be expressed by a single lexeme (and not a periphrastic causative construction) are restricted in terms of the lexical stereotype. Lexical stereotypes prescribe the corresponding – perhaps culture-dependent – manner (if any) and goal (if any) of the events [GERGELY and BEVER 1986]. The lexical stereotype of the verb *vág* 'cut' does not allow the non-standard use of a typical cutting instrument. For example: If John fastens a knife to the surface of a table, puts some bread on the edge of the knife and a heavy stone on the bread causing it to be divided into two parts, one can hardly call this event cutting. Instead, one would express it with a periphrastic construction: *Doing this and this, John causes that...* However, the lexical stereotype of the verb *vág* 'cut' does not exclude the application of typical instruments without the special purposes of shortening and cutting a shape as well as the use of non-typical instruments. In the latter case the agent who cuts something may use non-typical instruments in at least the following two ways, though such situations are not very likely to occur in reality:

(3) (a) either in a way characteristic of the instrument used but uncustomary for the object which is cut (e.g. cutting bread into two with an axe (at one blow)),

  (b) or in a way uncharacteristic of the instrument used but customary for the object which is cut (e.g. moving the edge of an axe on bread in a way we use a knife).

Furthermore, a small flat rock is not an instrument and, consequently, it is not inherently assigned any goals. Nonetheless, it can occasionally be used to cut something in a way we cut with a knife. This cutting event is similar to that of the type (3b) with the difference of not using an instrument. Moreover, the object (or the instrument) to cut with does not necessarily have any sharp edge. So such a non-typical object can be applied in a way uncustomary for both the instrument used (if any) and the object which is cut, but the result of a causative event, i.e. a not-whole physical object, comes into being in a way similar to cases of typical cutting and to the cases in (3a) and (3b) of non-typical cutting (e.g. cutting a bar of soap with a thread).

Because of the above-mentioned possibilities of (non-typical) cutting, the formula in (1), i.e. 'using a sharp-edged instrument, x (= a physical object) causes y (= a physical object) to become not whole', does not necessarily hold true for *vág* 'cut'. Instead of (1), we can state (4) as a formula containing the common core, or necessary components, of *vág* 'cut' as follows:

(4) 'using z (= a physical object), x (= a physical object) causes y (= a physical object) to become not whole'. [1]

However, in order to get conceptually differentiated meanings in contexts, i.e. slightly different meanings within one and the same conceptual domain, one needs to supplement the representation based on (4) and the lexical stereotype of *vág* 'cut' with the indication of the prototype and consequently with possible deviations from it. So, we reach a special pattern of the division of labor between the under-specified linguistic encoding, combined with lexical stereotype and prototype, and the contextual interpretation. However, it differs from the previously elaborated conception of conceptual differentiation in Two-level Conceptual Semantics [BIERWISCH 1983, 1996], not only in connection with the Hungarian verb *vág* 'cut' in particular but also in general. In terms of SCHWARZE [1982], the lexeme *vág* 'cut' does not have such a relational meaning inside which it may differentiate conceptually according with contexts. Rather, the verb at stake owns a **partly** relational meaning, in case of which – since necessary relational components are not sufficient ones at the same time – prototypicality conditions also play a crucial role in the identification of its denotation. As to the general aspect of the present analysis, from my lexical pragmatics point of view [BIBOK 2004], which allows for the

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[1] For a comparison of (3) with the dictionary definitions, see BIBOK [2002].

conceptual meaning of words to be represented by means of decomposition and prototype, there is a more relevant distinction than that between language knowledge and world knowledge (proposed in Two-level Conceptual Semantics). It is the distinction between decoding and inference that is relevant for the delineation of lexical pragmatics. In other words, the point is how a great number of meanings appearing in contexts are inferred from lexically encoded information.

2.2. Other Hungarian verbs: *nyír* 'cut through pressing/shearing/mowing', *fűrészel* 'saw' and *borotvál* 'shave'

These Hungarian verbs have more specialized meanings than *vág* 'cut' in the sense that they indicate a typical instrument to be used or at least a narrower range of typical instruments. In the case of *nyír* 'cut through pressing/shearing/mowing', the typical instrument is one or another kind of scissors: *nyírja valakinek a haját/körmét* 'cut one's hair/nails' – with scissors, nail-scissors, *nyírja a birkát, a sövényt* 'shear the sheep, cut the hedge' – with shears, hedging-shears (in Hungarian these instruments are also called scissors). Technical progress can change the range of typical instruments: e.g. cutting one's hair with a hair-clipper and cutting grass with a lawn-mower. In case of the verbs *fűrészel* 'saw' and *borotvál* 'shave', the typical instruments are already clear from the word-formation structure. These verbs are derived from the nouns denoting the instruments used typically to carry out the given actions, namely, from *fűrész* 'saw' and *borotva* 'razor', respectively.

Non-typical cases of x's causing y to become not whole with a pair of scissors, a saw or a razor which can be expressed by a corresponding single lexeme (and not a periphrastic causative construction) are restricted in terms of the lexical stereotype: like the verb *vág* 'cut', it does not allow the non-standard use of a typical instrument. However, the lexical stereotypes of these verbs do not exclude the use of instruments not characteristic of an object which is cut/shorn/mown, sawed or shaved, the application of non-typical instruments (and even objects without inherent functions) in a way customary for typical instruments (cf. (3a) and (3b) above).

What has to be added to the prototype of the verb *nyír* 'cut through pressing/shearing/mowing' is that typical instruments are used with the special purpose of shortening and/or cutting a shape. Without these purposes the event becomes non-typical (even in the case of using typical instruments).

3. Russian verbs of cutting

There are two properties in which the Russian verbs under investigation differ from their Hungarian counterparts. On the one hand, in the Russian language a general verb for cutting, like Hungarian *vág* 'cut' (and also English *cut*), does not exist. There are Russian verbs with more specific meanings which are not lexicalized by the hyponyms of Hungarian *vág* 'cut'. These Russian verbs are *rezat'* 'cut through pressing' and *rubit'* 'cut with a blow/blows'. The English translations

themselves indicate that their specificity concerns the manner of events, which can be formulated as in (5) and (6), respectively:

(5)   manner: 'through pressing';

(6)   manner: 'with a blow/blows'.

As necessary components, the general manner specifications in (5) and (6) have to be added to the formula in (4) in order to obtain the invariant meanings of *rezat'* 'cut through pressing'[2] and *rubit'* 'cut with a blow/blows'. Their corresponding prototypes should be formed in accordance with the specificity of these invariant meanings.

On the other hand, among the other specific Russian verbs, namely, *strič'* 'cut through pressing/shearing/mowing', *brit'* 'shave' and *pilit'* 'saw; file', there is a verb which denotes two entirely different events of x's causing y to become not whole. It is the verb *pilit'* 'saw; file': the events expressed by it can typically be carried out − in one case − with a saw, which is used to cut, and − in the other case − with a file, which is not used to cut. Therefore, the prototype of *pilit'* 'saw; file' has to include two different kinds of instruments.

To conclude the contrastive section of the paper, it can be stated that the revealed cross-linguistic differences correlate with the language-specific characteristics of underspecified lexical encoding, which, in turn, influence variable possibilities of Hungarian and Russian lexemes under investigation to be conceptually differentiated in contexts.

4. Conclusions

My examination of Hungarian and Russian verbs meaning 'cut' has resulted in an adequate description of their meanings and a reliable structure of their lexical-semantic representations because it offers a comprehensive model of derivations of several contextual meanings. Moreover, these results could be reached in a conception of lexical pragmatics which argues for a division of labor between the underspecified linguistic encoding, combined with lexical stereotype and prototype, and the contextual interpretation.

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[2] For a comparison of the underspecified meaning representation of *rezat'* 'cut through pressing' with its dictionary definitions, see Bibok [2007, 2009: 10–15].

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Резюме

О концептуальной дифференциации: Венгерские и русские глаголы со значением 'каузировать становиться нецелым'

В настоящей статье исследуются венгерские глаголы *vág* 'резать, рубить, стричь', *nyír* 'стричь', *fűrészel* 'пилить' и *borotvál* 'брить' в сопоставлении с русскими *резать, рубить, стричь, пилить* и *брить*. Предлагается, что контекстуальные значения глаголов выводятся посредством концептуальной дифференциации. Более того, представляется своеобразное разделение труда в рамках лексической прагматики между недоспецифицированным лингвистическим кодированием, соединенным с лексическими стереотипами и прототипами, и контекстуальной интерпретацией.