MEANING POTENTIALS AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN LEXIS AND CONTEXTS: AN EMPIRICAL SUBSTANTIATION

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to a theory of lexical semantics and situated sense-making which aims at explaining how meaning is constituted in and across contexts, in a dialogical interplay between lexical resources and aspects of situations.

We propose that the semantics of words or grammatical constructions are not just abstract schemas, to be filled in by pragmatic enrichment in situated uses. Nor are words associated with simple lists of different usages. Instead, we propose a theory of meaning potentials. The basic assumptions of such a theory are that linguistic resources provide language users with semantic resources to understand, say and mean specific things in particular usage events, and that this always involves an interplay with contextual factors.

The study reported here is an exercise in empirical pragmatics, using authentic data from language use. We explore the meaning potential of the Swedish adjective ny ‘new’ by examining its interplay with a specific grammatical construction, x-och-x (‘x-and-x’: in English roughly ‘x, it depends on what you mean by x’). X-och-x is a conventionalised and (largely) conversational practice, by which language users activate and negotiate parts of the meaning potential of a word x, such as ny, in order to establish a local situated meaning of it. In doing so, they exploit their knowledge of what x can mean, performing what can be seen as users’ semantic analyses in authentic communicative interaction.

Our study can also be read as a contribution to Construction Grammar, attempting to develop a more dynamic, interactional interpretation of this theory than has previously been put forward in the literature.

Keywords: Lexical semantics; Pragmatics; Dialogical linguistics; Meaning potential; Contexts; Dynamic construal of meaning; Grammatical construction; Adjective.

1. Introduction

In most traditional approaches to semantics, lexical items are associated with fixed and static meanings. Yet, lexical meanings often change diachronically, and synchronic studies of conversation show that a dynamic sense-making of utterances takes place in local situated contexts. It can therefore be argued that the dynamics of diachronic change and situated sense-making must guide the ways in which lexical meaning is conceptualised and described (cf. Blank 2003).

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1 This text is based on a lecture given at IPrA, Riva del Garda, Italy, July 2005. For valuable comments on earlier drafts of the article, we thank Jens Allwood, Robin Cooper, Arnulf Deppermann, Elisabet Engdahl, Thorstein Fretheim, Jenny Hartman, Palle Leth, Benjamin Lyngfelt and one anonymous reviewer of Pragmatics. However, we take full responsibility for all remaining inadequacies.
Recent trends in linguistic semantics have involved a move in the direction of ‘contextualist’ theories. They suggest that the meaning of the linguistic expressions themselves cannot be accounted for unless conditions of use in context are somehow specified. Any natural language is designed to be used in and across contexts, and it would be odd if linguistic resources would remain entirely unaffected by their conditions of use. Yet, there are still some scholars, notably Cappelen & Lepore (2005), who have opposed this trend, and argued for a relatively traditional semantics that is ‘insensitive’ to contextual influence (barring that a minimal set of indexicals, such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘now’ and ‘that’, must be accounted for in context-sensitive terms). While Cappelen & Lepore deal primarily with sentence meaning and are expressly neutral to specific theories of lexical meaning (op.cit.; 144), they unequivocally presume the existence of stable, ‘insensitive’ word meanings.

We believe that a contextualist semantics is needed. But there are different types of contextualism, also within what Cappelen & Lepore (op.cit.) term ‘radical contextualism’. Perhaps, the most common present-day assumption is that the semantics of linguistic expressions is underspecified and therefore always supplemented by pragmatic enrichment, when expressions are exploited in situated use (Carston 2002). This position is compatible, indeed often combined, with semantic minimalism, that is, the thesis that as much as possible of the specification of situated meaning-making should be relegated to pragmatics. For example, this is the stance of most relevance-theoretical accounts. Another position that involves more of a semantic ‘maximalism’, implies that semantic entries involve some considerable (but possibly varying) amount of context-related information. This might be resonant with cognitivist and construction-grammatical approaches (e.g. Croft & Cruse 2004). We will develop some aspects of a theory espousing such an assumption, namely, a theory of meaning potentials.

2. Linguistic resources and their meaning potentials

Contextualist theories assume that linguistic resources, that is, words and grammatical constructions, do not come with fixed and ready-made meanings that are used or realised in each and every usage event. Instead, within the language users’ minds, there is always an obligatory interaction between linguistic resources and contexts that determines the specific situated interpretation(s). Croft and Cruse (2004) talk about a “dynamic construal of meaning” in situations of use. Sinclair (2004: 133) stresses that “many, if not most, meanings require the presence of more than one word for their normal realization.” Such a dynamic theory of meaning-making will need a theory of linguistic semantics, including in particular lexical semantics, that assumes meanings of linguistic resources to be relatively stable, and yet open and dynamic, and it must be capable of explaining how words can be conventionally – or sometimes less conventionally – used in different ways in different contexts.

Contexts of an utterance or text comprise linguistic (i.e. global and local (prior)) co-texts, the surrounding concrete situation, and various abstract contexts, primarily cognitive ones (knowledge about the world in general and specific topical domains) but also knowledge about other participants and the common biography with or between them, and finally, about the overarching communicative activity type or textual genre.

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2 For example, Fretheim (2005). For extensive discussion, see Recanati (2004).
3 Cf. Langacker’s (1987: 69) notion of ‘partial sanction’.
There is no space here to lay out a full theory of contexts (cf. Fetzer 2004). Suffice it to say that we assume that contexts co-develop with discourse, or, to put it the other way around: In and through their discourse and interaction, participants are dependent on and invoke contextual resources, but they also create contextual resources which may then remain accessible to them in their subsequent interaction.

A definition of *meaning potential* might run as follows: The meaning potential of a lexical item or a grammatical construction is the set of properties which together with contextual factors, including features of the linguistic co-text as well as various situational conditions, make possible all the usages and interpretations of the word or construction that language users find reasonably correct, or plainly reasonable in the actual situations of use. Speakers and listeners use the potentials of words and other expressions to mean and understand specific things in context.

Akin to the notion of meaning potential is that of *semantic affordance*. ‘Affordance’ as a concept and term was first introduced by Gibson (1966, 1979) in his ecological theory of perception. Objects and events in the world can be differentially perceived and understood by human subjects, in different perspectives in different situations. Gibson proposed that the objects and events offer different possibilities of interpretation, or with another term, different affordances. The concept has later been extensively used in theorising tools and artefacts (Norman 1990), and recently also applied to language (Thibault 2005: 124). It is important to realise that affordances, at least in one interpretation, are not properties of an isolated stimulus but aspects of the objects and events in the world *in relation to* human perceivers and users in situations. Accordingly, lexical meanings afford language users with semantic potentialities to be exploited in situated use.

It is of course not just lexical resources that provide language users with affordances of meaning. (Besides, these are most probably of different kinds for different types of lexemes.) Grammatical constructions, whose expression side consists of configurations of several morphosyntactic and prosodic elements (plus sometimes lexical material), also have meaning potentials. Since grammatical meaning is often more abstract and procedural than that of some classical word types, we usually deploy the term ‘functional potential’ about the meaning potential of a grammatical construction. However, we assume that the boundary between grammar and lexis is fuzzy in several ways. Such an assumption has been made by scholars of different theoretical persuasions, in cognitive linguistics and construction grammar (e.g. Langacker 1987; Goldberg 1995; Fried & Östman 2005) and in corpus-based discourse linguistics (Sinclair 2004).

### 3. The term ‘meaning potential’ in the literature

The term ‘meaning potential’ (or ‘semantic potential’) occurs rather frequently in recent literature within several approaches to linguistic semantics and the pragmatics of communication (e.g. Fauconnier and Turner 2003; Croft and Cruse 2004; Bezuidenhout 2002; Recanati 2004), as well as within computational linguistics (e.g. Rieger 2005). In most cases, the concept has then been presented as a general way of describing the connection between word meaning and context, but most often it has been only pretheoretically used, rather than theoretically explored.

Other researchers, within somewhat divergent traditions, use meaning potential as a more central part of their theories. Such recent theorisations are due to Allwood
Kerstin Norén and Per Linell (1998, 2003) and Evans (2006). Allwood and Evans seem to think of a given expression’s meaning potential (or ‘semantic potential’ in Evans’s case) in terms of its capacity to produce meaning either by combining, in particular contexts, with certain other expressions or with different cognitive models (knowledge structures). For Evans, word meaning is ‘protean’ (p. 492), i.e. open and situationally negotiable. We would prefer to describe this in more action-oriented terms, that is, as speakers’ (and listeners’) exploitation of the semantic affordances of linguistic resources (words, grammatical constructions, etc.) and other semiotic resources in sense-making activities.

However, the most well-known proponents of a notion of meaning potential are probably those belonging to the Hallidayan traditions in linguistics (Halliday 1973; Butt & Matthiessen forthc.). These scholars usually apply the notion to complex situated sense-making events, such as utterances, texts or films, or alternatively, at a more general level about the semantic potentialities of an entire language or language variety (Hasan 1996; Thibault 2005). By contrast, we shall, like Allwood (op. cit.), develop the theory of meaning potentials as applied to basic linguistic resources, that is, lexical items and grammatical constructions.

Most linguists seem to think of lexical meanings, whether as potentials or fixed feature-sets, as more or less internal to the linguistic system itself. By contrast, we take it as something of a definitional property that meaning potentials are affordances (in the lexeme or grammatical construction) to combine with (dynamic) properties of contexts in order for situated meanings or interpretations to be constituted. Contexts are by definition not part of the language system as such. As we already noted, relevant contexts include situations, locally and globally co-occurring linguistic resources, topical domains and communicative activity types. A theory of meaning potentials assumes that parts of a word’s meaning are evoked, activated or materialised, foregrounded or backgrounded, in different ways in the different types of contexts, in which it is exploited. Thus, there is no fixed and static semantic structure which is always activated in its entirety every time a specific linguistic resource, be it a word or a grammatical construction, is used.

The situated meaning of a word (or a complex linguistic expression) in a particular utterance event is co-determined by the meaning potential(s) and relevant contextual factors. At the same time, the meaning potentials themselves emerge as the result of abstraction and abduction processes from many previous meaning determinations that the individual language user or the collectivity of language users (the speech community) has been involved in. We assume that community members share a considerable amount of knowledge, but they naturally have somewhat different linguistic biographies too.

The process of situated conceptual determination often takes place over an interactional sequence in a conversation or a text. Meaning potentials are synchronically dynamic (they can be creatively used in new situations), and they can change diachronically over time. We as linguists can find and study empirical evidence of the meaning potential structure that language users utilise.

Our notion of meaning potential fits a dialogical epistemology of language, action, cognition and communication. A dialogical theory emphasises the essence of interaction; interactions between self and other, between utterances and overarching activity types, between linguistic resources and contexts, and between different linguistic resources (Linell 2006). Accordingly, ‘dialogical approaches’ have often argued for dynamic semantic potentialities in lieu of static meanings (e.g. Mukařovský 1977 [1940]; Rommetveit 1974, 1992: 29; Marková 1992; Linell 1998; Lähteenmäki
2004). Nonetheless, for most of these scholars too, proposals regarding semantic potentialities have remained rather abstract and empirically unsubstantiated.

The aim of our present research is therefore to empirically explore the notion of meaning potential, as it is applied to lexical resources, in a series of case studies of different kinds of words and their situated use. In this regard, we resonate very much with the work of Deppermann (2005), who has explored the selection of particular lexical resources in specific contexts of conversational interaction. However, Deppermann does not aim at analysing the structure of lexical meaning potentials systematically, and he mentions the notion only in passing (p.290, 314). Following methodological guidelines from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and discursive psychology, his focus is instead on the processes and practices of local situated sense-making, particularly on the co-selection of particular lexical resources. For us it is an important assumption that the determination of situated meaning is not entirely driven by lexical semantics, nor is it established entirely by local talk-in-interaction. Instead, language users can make sense by combining lexis (and grammar) with contexts, i.e. by selecting particular semiotic resources – with specific meaning potentials – to interact with co-selected relevant contextual dimensions.

4. Aims of our research

The superordinate aim of this article is to elaborate the theory of meaning potentials a few steps further than has so far been done in the literature. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to the development of more precise hypotheses about three different aspects of the theory:

(a) How is the meaning potential of a lexical item structured? How abstract and schematic (Carston 2002) is word meaning? Are there variations across lexemes and grammatical constructions?

(b) What kinds of operations on lexical meaning potentials apply in usage events?

(c) What kinds of context, more exactly, are operative in different kinds of usage events?

Needless to say, we can only begin to unpick the intricacies of these issues. At the same time, however, there is a secondary aim for this article, which concerns the analysis of the interplay between lexis and grammar, as exemplified by two resources in the Swedish language, namely the lexeme ny (‘new’) and the grammatical construction of x-och-x (see below), as they interact in authentic usage events. To some extent, we shall also look at the x-och-x construction in interplay with other lexemes. In doing so, we naturally hope to gain knowledge of similar phenomena in languages in general.

The study reported here is part of a more comprehensive project, in which we utilise various methods to explore issues pertaining to the meaning potentials of lexical resources and grammatical constructions in Swedish.4 Our theoretical background is

4 Some of these involve the dialogical (i.e. interactional and contextual) construals of situated meanings in conversation; one study concerns the Swedish indefinite pronoun man ‘one, you’ (Linell & Norén 2005a). Another study of collocations in the form of word pairs, for example, involving Swedish
largely built on lexical pragmatics, cognitive grammar and interactional linguistics, but there is also a certain affinity with the computational (corpus-linguistic) study of lexis (Sinclair 2004).

5. Data: ny and x-och-x in Swedish

In one of the most comprehensive, contemporary dictionaries of Swedish, Nationalencyklopedins ordbok (NEO) (1995/96), the lexeme ny ‘new’ is presented like this:

1. "som bringats att existera för helt kort tid sedan”
   'which has been brought into existence only a short time ago’

2. "som inte tidigare är känd eller använt (om ngn el ngt som tidigare existerat, tänkts etc.)”
   'which is not previously known or used (about something which has existed, been thought about etc.)’

3. "som tillkommer utöver det tidigare (givna el underförstådda)”
   'which is added beyond what is already there (as given, or implied)’

4. "som återigen förekommer (och är aktuell e.d.)”.
   ‘which occurs once again (and is of current interest, or the like)’

This account indicates that ny is a polysemous item with four clearly separate senses. Some of the semantic dimensions cluster around ‘age’ (1 and 4) and ‘familiarity’ (2), which are the two semantic frames assigned to ‘new’ by FrameNet (2005).

In some respects, the semantic aspects of ny that we will report on here may seem to square well with what is given in the entries for ny in NEO and other standard Swedish (diachronic or synchronic) dictionaries. However, such lexicographic works have not developed an explicit semantic-pragmatic theory of word meaning, whether based on meaning potentials or not. Unlike the dictionaries, we will not in the end come up with a polysemous theory of ny.

The x-och-x construction is a conventionalised phrasal resource of the kind that Fillmore et al. (1988) call ‘formal idiom’ (or ‘schematic idiom’ in the terminology of Croft & Cruse 2004: 234). Such a schema is lexically open and can be regarded as a grammatical construction. The example explored in Fillmore et al. is the English let alone construction. This is a productive construction with free slots (x, y in $F^x$ x let fräsch ‘fresh’ in e.g. ‘fresh and clean’, ‘fresh and healthy’, ‘fresh and new’, point to different aspects of the meaning of fräsch, and so on (Norén 2006). A forthcoming study will analyse meaning variation in words across texts in large multi-genre language corpora; more specifically, we work with the lexical items arbete, kraft and energi, ‘work’, ‘force’ and ‘energy’, as used in different genres, e.g. religious, pedagogical, scientific, legal and news-media contexts.

5 Sinclair’s (op.cit.) notions of collocation, colligation and semantic preference are obviously related to what we propose about lexical co-selection.

6 Compared to the dynamic theory of meaning potentials, frame semantics comes out as a rather rigid theory for linking semantic frames to prototypical situations.

Meaning potentials and the interaction between lexis and contexts

alone y), but its meaning cannot be derived from its lexical makeup (let and alone) and its grammatical structure; ‘unlimitedly many new expressions can be constructed within its pattern, their meanings constructed by means of semantic principles specifically tied to this construction” (Fillmore et al. op. cit.: 507). Beyond these general properties of schematic idioms, there are, as we will see, other similarities shared between the let alone construction and the x-och-x construction. First, they both involve two conjoined focused elements. Secondly, let alone occurs against the background of a presupposed semantic scale (Fillmore et al.: 523). For example, Max won’t eat shrimp, let alone squid involves the construction of a scale of, say, distastefulness or cost, and it is presupposed that squid is higher up on that scale than shrimp. Precisely which semantic-pragmatic scale is made relevant depends on the situated context. We will see below that a scalar semantics is often involved in the use of x-och-x too.

The x-och-x construction is used as a syntactically non-integrated part in turn- or utterance-initial positions. Its core segment consists of two tokens of a word form x, conjoined by the common Swedish conjunction och ‘and’. The spoken colloquial form of och is å. A simple example from a mundane talk exchange is the following:

(1) (Authentic example noted: A sees his neighbour B leaving a car that he (A) has not seen before): 11
1. A. har du köpt ny bil?
2. B. ny å ny, den e sju år gammal

“1. A have you bought a new car? (note: Here, the Swedish original has no article)
2. B. new and new, it is seven years old”

X-och-x can be deployed when a particular expression x has been used by somebody in a prior conversational contribution. In other words, x-och-x is a ‘meta-linguistic’ grammatical construction in the terminology of Kay (2004). In our example (1), A uses the characterisation ny ‘new’ (line 1) with indirect reference to a specific car in the physical context. B, in his turn (line 2), does not find this description quite apt, since the car is in fact rather old (‘seven years old’). However, B does not rule out the use of ny entirely. Indeed, the situation at large suggests that he accepts another interpretation of ny: The car has recently been acquired, that is, it is ‘new’ for him as the owner. In addition, of course, it is ‘new’ to A as a perceiver; he has not seen it before.

As we can see, a simple case like example (1) involves several meanings of ny. We shall argue that to the extent that these are recurrent and well entrenched usages, they belong to the lexicalised semantic affordances of ny that language users know. At the same time, some semantic aspects seem to be more central than others. These we shall call ‘core aspects’. In the case of ny, a core aspect is not surprisingly ‘short time of

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8 The super-ordinate ‘F element’ usually involves a negative polarity (Fillmore et al.: 528f). The formula has been simplified by us.

9 In addition, let alone appears to be a ‘responsive construction’ in the sense discussed below for x-och-x. Cf. Fillmore et al., 1988: 517, 532).

10 The construction exists in the Scandinavian languages and in Finnish (cf. Lindström & Linell 2007). In Swedish, the construction was first reported in writing some 60 years ago (cf. SAOB), but it is still much more common in conversation than in writing.

11 In our examples, we have translated the x-och-x segments verbatim, although there is of course no direct English counterpart. The occurrences of x-och-x and their translations are given in boldface. In (1), which is taken from a spoken exchange, underlining indicates focal stress.
existence’ (the referent has only existed a relatively short time, or, if there is a reference to the future, may not yet have come into existence). But in fact, there also appears to be another core aspect of ny, which we will later refer to as the ‘one in a series’ aspect. In (1), it remains tacit, but clearly the interlocutors both know and presuppose that B had had a car, at least one, before the ‘new’ one. The Swedish article-less form (ny bil rather than en ny bil) strengthens this interpretation. We shall assume that ‘one in a series’ is a pragmatic presupposition, which is also a core aspect of ny. As we shall see, it can sometimes be made explicit, and either asserted or denied.12

In talk-in-interaction, the x-och-x construction can be used both in response to what the other has said (as in (1)) or to something uttered by the speaker herself. In writing, such as in our Internet corpus to be used in this article, most examples are of course self-responsive. The functional potential of the x-och-x construction is to negotiate the choice of a specific word in a specific context. By means of x-och-x, the speaker objects to the proposed situated use of x, or rather he proposes a negotiation of its meaning, suggesting that x is in some way problematic as a characterisation of the state-of-affairs referred to. In other words, x-och-x means something like ‘x?, that depends on what you mean by it’. Parts of this meaning potential do not fit the local situation, and instead, other parts of its potential must be utilised or stretched to make it fit.

The conversational practice of using x-och-x has some similarities with that of ‘concessive repair’, as explicated by Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson (2005). An example would be the following (op.cit.: 263): A school teacher has complained about the unruliness of the children in class, saying that she needs to get it all off her mind, and then mentions that she will have an in-service training the day after: So I can switch off. well, not really switch off but you know, relax. This concessive repair involves a response to a prior description (here: “switch off”), treating it as “partially unjustified”, as an “overstatement” (she did not mean “really switch off”), and then following it up with a “revised statement” (“you know: relax”), which does not, however, imply a complete “backing down”.13 In contrast to x-och-x, ‘concessive repair’ is always self-responsive, and is not as tightly grammaticalised. Furthermore, x-och-x is probably less of a repair; it treats the deployment of the expression x as in fact partially justified in the context at hand.

As a grammatical construction, x-och-x has an internal structure, and conditions on outer syntax (co-text) of three kinds: Conditions on antecedent strings, subsequent segments, and co-occurring linguistic resources (Lindström & Linell 2007).14

The primary antecedent condition is that if a morphological form of a lexical item x occurs in the preceding TCU or turn, x-och-x may be used. The internal structure is a twofold repetition of a word x, usually in the same morphological form as it had in the preceding utterance, with the word och ‘and’ in between: x och x. In about one out of six cases in our Internet data, the reduplicated form of x in x-och-x deviates from the source. (We will discuss some such examples below.) It is interesting that these deviations are always from an inflected form to (what is usually regarded as) a base

12 French seems to capitalise on counterparts of these two core aspects in the two lexical items neuf and nouveau, respectively. We thank Arnulf Deppermann for this observation.
13 See Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson (2005) for many more examples and analyses.
14 In the following, we will only give a summarising account of the formal properties of the outer syntax. For more details, see Lindström & Linell (2007).
form of the lexical item x (nouns unmarked for species, verbs in the infinitive, etc.). This indicates that what is negotiated through x-och-x is the conceptual content, rather than a particular reference.

Both x’s, or at least the second one, in the x-och-x segment are focally stressed, and the segment occurs in the pre-front field of a new turn or turn constructional unit (TCU) or as a free-standing left ‘annexation’ (Teleman et al. 1999). The x-och-x segment is thus syntactically non-integrated with the upcoming “revision”. However, in talk-in-interaction, it always appears to be prosodically integrated with, rather than marked off (separated) from, the continuing segment. At least, this holds for self-responsive usages (Lindström & Linell 2007). Thus, syntax and prosody point in somewhat different directions (cf. Selting 2005).

In x-och-x-contexts, two (or more) subsenses of a word, x, are contrasted. The use of och, ‘and’, in the construction sometimes bears some similarity to the contrastive use of och in antithetic word pairs like krig och fred, ‘war and peace’.

Co-occurring constructions are optional linguistic resources that are co-selected by the speaker. Like Deppermann (2005), we believe that co-selection of different semiotic resources are routinised parts of many communicative practices. Lindström & Linell (2007) argue that it belongs to the characteristics of a grammatical construction (or lexical item) that it is preferably “(co-)constructed with” specific other linguistic resources. In the case of x-och-x, these may be distancing responsive particles (nå ‘well’, njå ‘yes and no’) and concessive markers (eller ‘or’, i alla fall ‘anyway’, förresten ‘by the way’). In writing, the construction can also be followed by a question mark (example (9) below) or an exclamation mark.

A subsequent contribution following the x-och-x segment is obligatory (but see below). After using x-och-x the speaker should proceed with an utterance that confirms or foregrounds some aspects of x’s meaning potential, and simultaneously cancels or backgrounds other aspects. In this contribution, evidential markers like väl ‘I suppose’, ju ‘you know’, kanske ‘perhaps’, and nog ‘probably’ occur frequently. Phrases like det är en personlig tolkningsfråga ‘it is a question of personal interpretation’, allt är ju relativt ‘everything is relative’, frågan är väl ‘the question is, I suppose’, and constructions with men ‘but’, questions, and concessive clauses also occur. The explanation of why x is still appropriate in the situation, often starts with snarare ‘rather’, mer y (än en vanlig x) ‘more y (than an ordinary x)’, and phrases like vad det handlar om ‘what it is all about’ etc.

As we pointed out above, the subsequent string (usually a clause, or more) after the x-och-x segment is obligatory. Actually, there are some exceptions, particularly in our Internet data, where the subsequent segment is occasionally omitted. Example (2) is a case in point:

(2)  
Jag var fortfarande i den bästa bilen (bil och bil) vi stannade för att bada […]  
“I was still in the best car (car and car) we stopped to take a swim […].”

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15 In writing, at least in our data on Internet blogs, there are a few instances, such as example (7) below, in which it occurs as syntactically integrated.

Here, x-och-x is surrounded by parentheses, and in other cases, it is followed by dots (…). What happens in such examples is evidently that the implied “revision” is so strongly projected by the x-och-x segment that it can be omitted. Evidently, the conversational or textual practice of using x-och-x has become strongly conventionalised, and one recognises the x-och-x segment as part of an established grammatical construction, the continuation of which need not, in this case, be externalised.

Another salient feature of (2) is of course the change from the definite form bilen ‘the car’ in the source to the article-less (“naked”) form bil in the x-och-x segment. As we remarked above, such cases point to the fact that it is the conceptual meaning that is being activated in and through x-och-x; here, it can be questioned if the vehicle was a proper “car”, if it was sufficiently much of a prototypical car.

6. Method: Looking at two linguistic resources in interaction within metalinguistic utterance events

The function of x-och-x to highlight different sense aspects is the reason why the construction is useful for the analysis of the meaning potential of separate lexical items. Hence, the logic of our empirical study is to explore what kinds of variations in the exploitation of the meaning potential of particular lexical items one can observe in a corpus of x-och-x usage events. To accomplish this, we needed a lexical item that is very frequent, and also quite common precisely in x-och-x events. We chose the lexeme ny ‘new’ in Swedish. Thus, our main corpus ended up consisting of 130 examples of x-och-x applied to ny ‘new’, all googled from the Internet at two occasions in 2004. However, it is hardly satisfactory to explore only one single lexical item. The results could be an accidental outcome of the peculiarities of this specific item. Therefore, we proceeded to explore a supplementary corpus based on ten other lexical items. Here, we shall first summarise the analysis of the ny-och-ny corpus, and then proceed to the supplementary corpus.

7. Results: The meaning potential of ny ‘new’ in ny-och-ny ‘new-and-new’ usage events

We will now go through a number of examples (3-13) from our ny-och-ny-corpus, which are meant to illustrate the kinds of operations that language users apply to the meaning potential of ny when they adapt it to different situated demands. In and through this, parts of the structure of the meaning potential of ny, ‘new’, will be revealed.

In the first two examples the writers question if the period of time that has elapsed since the first appearance of the referent, is really short enough for it to be

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17 The total frequency of ny (in its various inflected forms) in the texts from which our data were drawn was well above 8 million. The only word we have found so far with a comparable frequency in x-och-x-constructions is gammal ‘old’.

18 Our study is obviously limited in other respects. For example, it is exclusively based on certain kinds of Internet texts. In addition, we do not know the characteristics of the whole population of texts from which our data have been drawn. It is possible that certain uses of ny are overrepresented in these genres. But these limitations should not have any impact on our principled arguments in this article.

19 For more details of the analyses of the Swedish originals, see Linell & Norén (2005b).
called ny ‘new’. Here, only one sense aspect is problematised, that is, one which can be paraphrased as ‘has existed for only a short time, given the specific kind of referent’.

(3)

*Hur som helst sitter jag här med mina nya snygga glasögon. Eller nya och nya, de har ju varit mina sedan den 8 mars [skrivet 20 augusti samma år]*

“All the same, here I am with my new posh glasses. Or new and new, they have been mine since the 8th of March [written on the 20th of August the same year]”

What the author of (3) calls into question is that more than five months may be too long for her glasses to be called new. The problematisation of this semantic aspect is clearly relative to the class of referents concerned. For example, in (4) the questioned time span is much longer, but here the referent is a language.

(4)

[Artikelrubrik:] Esperanto – hela världens nya språk.

[Kommentarinledning:] Nya och nya, har väl funnits ett bra tag ändå =) Mer än hundra år i alla fall.

“[Headline:] Esperanto – the new language of all the world

[Comment:] New and new, has been around for a while, hasn’t it =) More than a hundred years, anyhow”

In (4), a second contributor comments on the use of ny, ‘new’, in the headline of an Internet text. He or she questions if a language, Esperanto, which is more than a hundred years old, can really be referred to as new.

Intuitively, ‘short time of existence’ is a core aspect of the meaning of ny. Examples (3) and (4) involve the problematisation and relativisation of this aspect only, something which is quite frequent in our corpus. By contrast, in the next five examples (as well as in (1) above), the core aspect, ‘short time of existence (for the specific kind of referent)’ is cancelled in its absolute sense in favour of another aspect which is made relevant in the specific situation. These usages illustrate certain more restrictive ways of “being new” than can be generally inferred. They imply that the referent is new only to some relevant (kinds of) persons, to some (kinds of) context, only in form, etc. Such aspects are, we argue, also part of the meaning potential of ny ‘new’. Most of them are, due to frequency of occurrence (Croft & Cruse 2004: 292), entrenched subsenses of ny ‘new’ (Examples 3 - 8)

Examples (5) and (6) are both restrictions on what kind of role incumbent the referent is new to. One rather common case is that a referent is not new in the basic chronological sense, but is new for its owner (cf. also (1)):

(5)

“…i min nya SAAB 9000…Eller ny och ny, för mig är den ju det, men det är en -88

“…in my new SAAB 9000 [a car] … Or new and new, for me it is, but it is an -88 [year of manufacturing]”
The semantic aspect of ‘recent acquisition for the owner’ is a fairly common feature of ny ‘new’, as evidenced by our x-och-x events. Thus, it is arguably part of the conventionalised meaning potential of ny.

In example (6) the home-page is new to the perceiver, who is also the author of the Internet comment cited, but otherwise it seems to have existed for a longer period of time.

(6)

Vad fin din nya hemsida är! Ny och ny... Jag förstår att du har haft den ett tag, men jag har inte varit in och tittat på den förrän nu.

“Your new home-page looks very nice! New and new... I can understand that you have had it for a while, but I have not gone in to have a look at it until now”

The author of (6) cancels the core aspect, ‘short time of existence’ for the home-page in its absolute sense. The referent is only new to him or her as a reader. But this kind of novelty is evidently enough to license the use of ny.

In (7), the core aspect, ‘short time of existence’, becomes relativised in yet another way. Here, however, ‘being new’ is limited to a specific context, namely that of computer-game competitions (rather than playing on the web just for the sake of entertainment).

(7)

Roligt var det att se 4 nya spelare. Nya och nya var de kanske inte, de har ju spelat en hel del på nätet. Men i tävlingssammanhang var de färsningar.

“It was fun to see 4 new players. New and new perhaps they weren’t, they have been playing quite a lot on the web. But in competition contexts they were fresh arrivals.”

In (8), a person’s home-page and its contents have already existed for a long time, but the appearance is (somewhat) new, and this is evidently enough for the use of ny:

(8)

Så var den äntligen klar! Min nya hemsida. Eller nja, ny och ny, det är samma gamla skåpmat jag bjuder på, men i en lite ny tappning bara.

“Finally, it is finished! My new homepage. Or perhaps not, new and new, I’m offering the same old stuff, only in a somewhat new version.”

Example (8) suggests that continuity or discontinuity over time is a relevant consideration when ny is being used. In (8), something (a home-page or rather: Its contents) has existed for a long time, which speaks against the use of ny, but there is a sufficiently extensive discontinuity in form that warrants the use of ny.

Incidentally, examples (5), (6) and (8) (and (12) below) exhibit the same change from the source nya to the reduplicated uninflected form ny och ny. This particular change is quite common in our data; indeed, if nya is the definite form singular, the change to the uninflected form is slightly more frequent than the identically copied nya (as in (4)). It is interesting that a corresponding change from the
example, we see how the discontinuity aspect is exploited, partly in a way opposite to
(8):

(9)  
\[ \text{Företaget heter Kurtz och ska sälja konst på ett nytt sätt. Eller ja, nytt och nytt. De ska sälja konst ungefär som man gjorde på 1800-talet.} \]

"The company is called Kurtz and will sell art in a new way. Well, new and new. They will sell art in approximately the way it was done in the 19th century."

Here, there is a resemblance between the “new” way of selling art and certain ways of
doing it a long time ago. But this strategy has been discontinued, and it now reappears,
as if it was “new”. We can note that reappearance is a sense aspect of ny that was listed
as no. 4 by NEO cited above. Reappearance presupposes a kind of discontinuity of
existence; a phenomenon may have occurred before, but there have been no instances
for some time. The reappearance is recent (or, as in (9), actually something expected in
the (near) future); the reappearing instances have had a ‘short time of existence’.

In examples (5) through (9), various contextual factors have led to the favouring
of other, more restricted, conceptual elements of the meaning potential than those which
are normally inferable just from the core aspect of ny. In examples (10) through (12), by
contrast, other kinds of operations occur. The core aspect is confirmed or denied, while
different connotations are brought up and made relevant by being either foregrounded or
backgrounded (or even denied). The connotational sense aspects concern qualities that
are permanently or temporarily associated semantically with “being new” (in its absolute
sense). Although examples of this type are not very frequent (see Table 1), they suggest
that connotations are easily made relevant when a word of the ny type is used.

(10)  
\[ \text{La Défense […] är en helt ny stadsdel konsekvent byggd i mycket modernistisk stil. Eller ny och ny, det är väl över 30 år sedan den började byggas, men är ändå i sin början. Det finns byggkranar lite överallt. Detta skall bli ett nytt Manhattan men med Fransk stil och klass.} \]

"La Défense […] is a completely new city district, consistently erected in a very
modernistic style. Or new and new, it’s probably more than 30 years since they
started to build it, but it is still developing. There are cranes everywhere. This area
is supposed to end up as a new Manhattan, but with French style and identity."

In example (10), a city district, La Défense in Paris, has existed for quite a long time,
but it is described as still developing, which can warrant the characterization of it being
‘new’. The author of (10) denies (or questions) the core aspect ‘short time of existence’
for the city district in favour of its potential for development. This connotation is
foregrounded.

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homonymic plural form nya (as in (7), (9) and (11)) never occurs, at least not in our data. Specificity of
reference is thus more susceptible to deletion than plurality of referents. This appears to be in accordance
with our thesis that x-och-x is a device for negotiating conceptual content (see above, p. 00), in our data of
the adjective ny; it does not affect the number of the referents involved, though.
Sometimes a connotation is explicitly mentioned, and thus actualised, only to become backgrounded in situated importance. Thus, in (11), the short time of existence of a couple of photos is confirmed, but the author obviously feels the need to disclaim the connotational meaning that often goes with new things: That they are also currently valid or continuously updated. If this connotation is not true of the referents, they wouldn’t readily be called ‘new’. Here, this connotation of ‘currently valid’ is backgrounded:

(11) Sidan uppdaterad. Med lite nya bilder [bild av skribenten med hår] … fast nya och nya...Mina kära elever har ju rakat av mig allt hår sen dess så speciellt aktuella är de kanske inte.

“You see, I want to sell my almost new Jeep Laredo pickup -88. Well, new and new, it has some rust on it. And more, it is crashed and its frame is a bit askew/distorted. So new rear tyres will only stay in good condition for about 7 000 miles, or so. But it is extra equipped with a radio set, which, that is true, doesn’t work right now, but it is surely possible to repair it.”

The connection between short time of existence and freshness is demonstrated in this example. ‘Short time of existence’ is confirmed as the core aspect and ‘freshness’ is foregrounded. By this, there is no devaluation of the meaning of ny ’new’, as is normally expected from the use of the x-och-x construction. This may be due to the ironic usage. Further, we cannot from this example tell if the connotation ‘fresh’ is a lexicalized part of ny or a more unique situational adaptation, since it is neither backgrounded or foregrounded at the expense of the core aspect. But the existence of conventionalised word-pairs like ny och fräsh ‘new and fresh’ gives an indication that it is lexicalised (Norén 2006).

Let us now introduce our last example in this section. This directly involves a semantic aspect, ‘one in a series’, which we earlier argued is both a core aspect and a presupposition of ny:

(13)
I augusti tillträdde det en ny Generalsekreterare för Svenska Scoutrådet, Johan Strid. Eller ny och ny, det har aldrig funnits någon förr.

“Last August a new secretary general of the Swedish Scout Council, Johan Strid, started his work. Or new and new, there has never existed one before.”

The use of ny involves a pragmatic presupposition that the new referent is one in a series in contexts like a new wife and Happy New Year! The salience of the presupposition differs across contexts, but our hypothesis is that it is always there, as an affordance in the meaning potential. Indeed, it seems to be a core aspect, even though as a presupposition, it is seldom made explicit. In our examples, this presupposition is near at hand particularly in examples (1, 4, 6, 7, 11) above, and at least compatible with circumstances in almost all the others. Perhaps, it is only in (12) that the semantic aspect ‘one in a series’ is directly backgrounded. We would suggest that it is due to the co-selected word nästan ‘almost’ (min nästan nya Jeep, ‘my almost new Jeep’) that, in addition, strongly foregrounds the ‘short time of existence’ aspect. But in (13), something else is going on. Whereas one might argue that in (12), the presupposition was tacitly backgrounded, in (13) the author overtly takes it up, only to cancel it. That presuppositions can be cancelled in certain discourse contexts is well-known (Levinson 1983). In (13), the author cancels the ‘one in a series’ interpretation, while confirming the short time of existence of the referent in his capacity as the secretary general.

Let us now summarise the results of this study of ny-och-ny. It seems plausible that language users construe the meaning potential of ny ‘new’ as a couple of core aspects, plus a number of connected sense aspects of different types. A core aspect is an aspect that is always, or at least very commonly, relevant or made relevant for the situated interpretations (the usage events). Note, however, that this does not mean that the specific aspect is asserted (or presupposed) as being true in all these cases; on the contrary, activation of an aspect can be deployed for backgrounding or cancelling it (see further below).

Our results are largely in accordance with earlier models of ny or English new. But we have uncovered additional aspects, e.g. more connotations and presuppositions. A picture emerges that contrasts with the polysemeus description in the Swedish dictionary NEO and also to the FrameNet description. The most polysemy-like parts of the meaning potential are the subsenses, ‘new to different kinds of persons, contexts etc.’, but also in these cases the core aspect ‘short time of existence’ is relevant in at least one dimension. Less polysemous in nature are connotations and presuppositions, since they are so closely connected to the existence of the core aspect. From our rather small corpus we cannot really tell which of these sense aspects are conventionalised and which are new, but on the whole, high frequency and backgrounding are considered to be indicators of conventionalisation.

The examples further illustrate that the Swedish word ny can be used in situations where both some of its general default inferences from the core aspect of ‘short time of existence’, like ‘new to everyone’, ‘new in all contexts’, and some of its normal connotational meanings, like ‘updated’, ‘developing’ or ‘fresh’, are either treated as not suited to the situation or, by contrast, regarded as locally more relevant than the core aspect. By means of operations like cancelling, backgrounding, confirmation, foregrounding etc., the word can be dynamically adapted to new situations.
Table 1 shows the results of our analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of operation</th>
<th>Number of examples in our corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A.</strong> Problematises ‘short time of existence’ by questioning if it is <em>short enough</em> for the specific kind of referent.</td>
<td>25 (examples 3 and 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B.</strong> Cancels ‘short time of existence’ in its absolute sense, in <em>favour</em> of the referent having been the <em>owner’s</em> for only a short time.</td>
<td>9 (example 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C.</strong> Cancels ‘short time of existence’ in its absolute sense, in <em>favour</em> of the referent having been known by the <em>speaker/writer</em> for only a short time.</td>
<td>12 (example 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D.</strong> Cancels ‘short time of existence’ in its absolute sense, in <em>favour</em> of the referent having existed in a specific <em>context</em> for only a short time.</td>
<td>23 (example 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E.</strong> Cancels ‘short time of existence’ as regards the content or category of the phenomenon referred to, in <em>favour</em> of the form having existed only for a short time.</td>
<td>26 (example 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F.</strong> Cancels ‘short time of existence’ in its absolute sense, in <em>favour</em> of asserting the reappearance of something which has not existed for some time.</td>
<td>5 (example 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>G.</strong> Denies ‘short time of existence’ by <em>foregrounding</em> the capability of development.</td>
<td>1 (example 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H.</strong> Con<em>firm</em> <em>s</em> ‘short time of existence’ <em>but backgrounds</em> that the referent is also <em>updated</em>.</td>
<td>1 (example 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I.</strong> Confirms the relevance of ‘short time of existence’ and <em>foregrounds</em> the <em>freshness</em> of the referent.</td>
<td>1 (example 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J.</strong> Confirms ‘short time of existence’ but <em>cancels</em> the presupposition that the referent is <em>part of a series</em>.</td>
<td>2 (example 13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 reveals that the following types of operation on the meaning potential of *ny* occur in our data:21

a) Some events problematise only one sense aspect, and this is always ‘short time of existence for the kind of referent’ (Type A)

---

21 Table 1 covers 105 out of 130 examples. The rest of the examples in our corpus, about 20%, are less straightforward. In most of these cases, we were simply not able to retrieve enough co-text to classify them properly. In a few cases, several sense aspects were actively made relevant. The possible inclusion in this article of detailed discussions of these cases could have obscured the main force of the arguments, and therefore, we have left them out. We do not think that they would alter the picture of *ny* or of meaning potentials in general.
b) Other events cancel ‘short time of existence’ in its absolute sense in favour of one or another important restrictive conceptual aspect of the situational context, thus making up a kind of subsense. Sometimes one subsense is confirmed and another disfavoured (Types B - F).

c) Some events confirm or deny ‘short time of existence’, while backgrounding or foregrounding different connotations (Types G - I)

d) Occasionally, ‘short time of existence’ is confirmed, in combination with the cancellation of pragmatic presuppositions (Type J).

The semantic aspect ‘short time of existence (for the kind of referent concerned)’ comes out as central. The core nature of this denotational aspect is shown in several ways. First, if only one sense aspect is involved in a situated-sense determining operation, it is always this aspect. Secondly, if two or more sense aspects are included in the operation, one of them is always this core aspect.

However, we have argued that there is yet another core aspect: The referent is ‘one in a series’. This is (nearly) always relevant too. But it is different from ‘short time of existence’; it is seldom actively problematised. In our data, this happened only in Type J (see Table 1). We propose that it is presuppositional, rather than directly asserted or denied (disregarding the exceptional cases).

In our analysis, ny appears as monosemous at one level. The variation across situated meanings does not seem to affect the importance of the core aspects, even though they are sometimes questioned or backgrounded. But the meaning potential involves more than the core aspects. The other semantic aspects (as in Table 1) are not simply contextual modulations or purely occasional conceptualisations; we argue that they are types of situated interpretations that are directly associated with the meaning potential. However, there is considerable variation in their frequencies. Some, types A-F, are quite frequent and they are arguably interpretations that have become entrenched and conventionalised.

Other usages, basically G-J, are much less frequent in our corpus, and we cannot tell only from this study whether they too are entrenched and conventionalised. (Moreover, there could of course be other usages of ny and ny-och-ny that we have not encountered in our corpus.) However, here it is important to point out that in our view, meaning potentials should not be regarded as licensing only entrenched and conventionalised usages. A theory of meaning potentials should also account for innovative, unusual or even bizarre contextual interpretations, provided that they are comprehensible to competent language users. Lexical meanings are arguably dynamic, stretchable and extensible.

Moreover, returning to ny-och-ny, connotations and presuppositions are involved in every usage event of ny ‘new’, also when they are not directly problematised as in types G–J. Accordingly, they can be fitted into a chiefly monosemous view of ny. Similarly, types B–F, are conceptual variants of the general inferences connected with ny, and they can be seen as kinds of ‘subsenses’ (Croft and Cruse 2004: 128f.) of the core aspect ‘short time of existence’. On the other hand, the existence of subsenses, connotations and presuppositions testify to a rich structure of the meaning potential, something which entails at least some degree of polysemy.
8. The follow-up study: *x-och-x* in interplay with different lexemes

So far, we have identified a number of dimensions of the putative meaning of the lexeme *ny* ‘new’, and a number of operations performed on the meaning potential, when *ny* occurs in different *x-och-x* usage events. One might then ask: What is the contribution of precisely *x-och-x* to these situated meaning construals? Does *x-och-x* bring out a specific set of sense aspects that are different from what would be made relevant in other contexts?

To answer at least the first of these questions, we need data on *x-och-x* as applied to other words. (For the second question, we might also want authentic data on the use of *ny*, outside of *x-och-x* events, but that is beyond the scope of this study.) We therefore collected ten examples of each of the following lexemes, which we intuitively thought were partially mutually divergent and also sufficiently common in *x-och-x* events: *gammal* ‘old’, *svart* ‘black’, *bil* ‘car’, *gratis* ‘free of charge’, *kan* ‘can’, *många* ‘many’, *flytta* ‘move’, *slippa* ‘escape, be spared (from)’, *skönt* ‘pleasant’ and *normal* ‘normal’.\(^2\)

These data were drawn from the Internet in the same way as in the main study reported above. We will now proceed to presenting a few specific examples of *x-och-x* events from our second corpus.

An adjective like *ny* ‘new’ has a partially scalar semantics: Something can be more or less new. A quantifier like *många* ‘many’ is even more clearly based on a scale, but the scale can be contextually adjusted:

\[(14)\]

\[
\text{Många hittar till min sida nu för tiden, eller många och många, allt är ju relativt förstås. 10 st på en dag tycker jag är många……..:-))}
\]

"Many (people) find their way to my page these days, or many and many, everything is relative, of course. 10 individuals in one day I find many……..:-))"

The denotational core aspect of *ny* ‘new’ and *gammal* ‘old’ has to do with length of time: Short versus long time since inception. (Incidentally, *gammal* also involves ‘one in a series’, but not as strongly as *ny*.) For *svart* ‘black’ there is also a scale: There is a core colour, but also various nuances, e.g. of greyness, that only approach blackness. Example (15) is about a computer screen:

\[(15)\]

\[
\text{HD2+ chipet har inga svårigheter att visa många nyanser ”svart” utan de skiktningar som uppkommer med 7200. Svart och svart… Det är väl mer frågan om mörkgrått då denna modell liksom övriga familjemedlemmar valt att satsa på kräm istället för svärta.}
\]

\(^2\) In the case of *svart*, two examples had to be discarded, so we ended up only eight clear cases of *x-och-x* events. In addition to the ten items listed in the text, we looked at a smaller number of *x-och-x* events with *spel* ‘play (n.)’, *jag* ‘I’, *arbeta* ‘work (v.)’, *anstränga* ‘strain (v.)’, *våldigt* ‘awfully, extremely’, *altare* ‘altar’. Our selection was partially governed by the fact that we happened to have audio-taped *x-och-x* events with most of these items from talk-in-interaction. We recognise of course that the results are here at best suggestive, due to the limited size of our exploration.
"The HD2+ chip has no difficulties in showing many nuances of "black" without the shades which occur with 7200. **Black and black**… It is really a question about dark grey, since this model, like the rest of the family members, has chosen power before blackness."

The scalar dimension of ‘black’ can be found also in metaphorical use. In (16), the degree of ‘blackness’ is said to be a question of subjective assessment:

(16)

*Den här filmen är en otroligt våldsam och blodig film med många inslag av svart humor. Eller svart och svart; det är en personlig tolkningsfråga.*

"This film is an unbelievably violent and gory film with many instances of black humour. Or **black and black**: that is a question of personal interpretation."

The words so far exemplified seem to point to the (positive) end of a scale. With *x-och-x*, there is typically a negotiation if the reference situation is close enough to this end. The scale is sometimes quantifiable (‘many’). Verbs like *arbeta* ‘work’ and *anstränga* ‘strain’ are partly different; there is a minimal level of attainment under which you can not be said to work or make enough of an effort (‘strain yourself’). At the same time there is often a situational adjustment regarding what the work or strain really consists of, and this influences what dimension of the meaning potential is actualised:

(17)

*Det syns inte på mig när jag ler så mycket. Eller, när jag går runt och är lite småglad sådär och ler, så syns det knappt. Det är tråkigt. Men jag får väl anstränga mig mer bara..*[Svar:] *Anstränga och anstränga*… försök att titta dig själv i spegeln och typ prova eller nåt.*

"My smile is not really visible. Or, when I walk around being quite happy and smiling, it is hardly visible. That is sad. But I have to **strain** myself somewhat more…*[Answer:] *Strain and strain*… try to look at yourself in the mirror and kind of test or something."

In (17), a second person, in an other-responsive use of *x-och-x* (‘Answer:’), suggests that the degree of strain falls under the minimal level. If a person looks into a mirror to test out his or her smiles, it appears that smiling is not a very strenuous activity, and for that reason, *anstränga* ‘strain’ might not be quite an adequate characterisation of what is happening.

(18)

*Ett par veckor under en sommar feriarbetade jag i “trägårn”, ja arbetade och arbetade. För det mesta band jag buketter och satte ned dem i stora plasthinkar.*
"A couple of weeks during one summer I worked during my vacation [i.e. had a paid "vacation" job] in the "garden", well worked and worked. Most of the time I made flower bouquets and put them into plastic buckets."

In (18), the writer questions if his or her activities were really heavy or difficult enough to be labelled ‘work’. At the same time, it was paid for, and in that sense it would be legitimate to call it ‘work’.

To use a predicative adjective like skönt (neuter form) ‘pleasant, cool’, a minimal level of something positive (pleasant, cool) must be attained. Example (19) is about producing and selling cd-records:

(19)

Det är nog betydligt fler som känner till oss men som inte har nån aning om att vi har släppt något… som blir förvånade när man berättar. Fast det är lite skönt nästan. Eller ja, skönt och skönt, man skulle väl vilja sälja mer, men…

"There are probably more people who know about us but who don’t have any idea that we have released something… who are surprised when you tell them. Although that is a little pleasant almost. Or well, pleasant and pleasant, you would like to sell more, of course, but...”.

Obviously, there are several things that could be skönt ‘pleasant, cool’ for this artist. One of them is the pleasure of not being too well known, another is being successful in selling records. But in (19) only the first aspect is fulfilled, and that seems to be why the x-och-x construction is utilised.

Words like bil ‘car’, altare ‘altar’, jag ‘I’, and kan ‘can’ have prototypical meanings which involve a larger number of sense aspects. However, they can be situationally profiled or construed as scalar dimensions. Indeed, the construal of a scalar interpretation of one aspect may be due to the interplay with x-och-x.

(20)

Herz var snälla och ställde upp med en dragbil. Bil och bil förresten, en Landrover med gräsklipparmotor.

“Herz were nice and arranged a tug car for me/us. Car and car, by the way, a Landrover with a lawn-mower’s engine”.

Here, the referent seems to deviate from the prototypical car in two ways: A Landrover is used for special purposes (driving in a difficult terrain that a normal car would barely manage), and having a lawn-mower engine is not much for a real car. Thus, we could say that the referent is placed a bit down on an abstract scale of prototypicality.

(21)

"He took the car. I and E are stuck. Not a chance that we can go and visit anybody. Or can and can, but it would take a couple of hours and countless changes of train/bus."

The example in (21) points to the possibility or ability sense of ‘can’, rather than the permissibility sense. Within this, a scalar dimension is exploited.

In some cases, the meaning potential of $x$ includes really important sense aspects that are not met at all in the situation. We will now adduce some examples of this.

(22)

Sedan släpades vi båda fram till altaret av båda våra föräldrar. Altare och altare, vi valde att gifta oss borgerligt eftersom […]

“Then we were dragged to the altar by both our parents. Altar and altar, we chose a civil marriage, because […]”

In (22), the prototypical ‘religious’ sense of ‘being brought to the altar’ is absent, and the word is used metaphorically. But the usage can still be said to be compatible with the more general ‘ceremonial’ sense of the expression.

At face value, a pronoun like ‘I’ might be thought to have a simple deictic sense. But we know from the psychological and sociological literature from Freud to Goffman that the self consists of many layers, for example, degrees of agency. Therefore, jag ‘I’ can easily be used in the x-och-x construction:

(23)

jag var ju tvungen att passa på att måla lite på mitt “garage” nu när solen visade sig. Jag och jag förresten, min särbo som är en riktig 08:a är här på semester och jag måste nog erkänna att det är mest han som har varit målarmästare.

"I had to take the opportunity to paint at my “garage” now, when the sun was shining. I and I, by the way, my partner, who is a true 08-er [person from Stockholm] is spending his vacation here, and I must confess that he is the one who has acted master painter for the most part.”

When ‘I’ is used prototypically, the speaker is both the instigator and the doer. In (23), however, the latter is being denied.

In some cases, the meaning potential of $x$ includes presuppositional sense aspects that are not met in the situation (cf. Example (13) above with ny). The word flytta ‘move’ presupposes the existence of a concrete individual referent, which is moved in a physical (or metaphorical) space. In (24) however, this condition is not met; it is only the function that is transferred:23

(24)

Dragningen av Botniabanan i det aktuella området kan […] komma att leda till att hoppbacken flyttas 50 meter bakåt och vrids mot Åsdalen. Flytta och flytta

---

23 Note that Example (24) involves a change from the passive form flyttas ‘be moved’ to the infinitival base form flytta ‘move’.
förrестen. Vad det handlar om är att nuvarande fem backar som ingår i anläggningen rivs. En helt ny hoppanläggning byggs sedan på den nya platsen.

"The section of the Botnia railway in the area concerned might [...] lead to the moving of the ski jump some 50 yards backwards and turning it towards Åsdalen. Move and move, by the way. What it is all about is that the existing five ski jumps [i.e. constructions] in the establishment are torn down. A completely new ski jumping construction is then built at the new site."

If flytta ‘move’ involves a presupposition (the continued existence of an individual referent), slippa ‘escape, be spared (from)’ involves another kind of presuppositional aspect; the thing or situation that you escape from should be unpleasant. This aspect is strongly salient in our x-och-x examples of slippa, as in (25):


"This week, I will escape the bar. Or escape and escape, the bar is fun, but it is nice not to have to work late every day. Plus that the bar is not fun during daytime, because then there are no customers."

At the same time, there is a scalar aspect of slippa too; the word can normally not be used unless a sufficient level of unpleasantness is reached.

Our studies, including the follow-up study, have led us to some hypotheses of different generality. On the one hand, we have uncovered some important semantic interactions between grammatical constructions and lexical items, as they are co-selected in actual interaction. On the other hand, we can advance some proposals concerning the potentials of x-och-x and the various specific lexemes that we have investigated. Let us summarise the last-mentioned result first, before we proceed to some general conclusions.

The functional potential of x-och-x is centred around the speaker’s wish to revise a characterisation given of something by the use of the expression x. The revision involves relativising, devaluing, modifying or backing down from something like an absolute or “full” interpretation of x. We can say that the revision is scalar in one (or more) dimensions. The downgrading is implemented differently depending on the requirements of the situation and on the lexical semantics of the type of word that x is. It is the latter aspect that interests us here. Some words have a clear core aspect that either takes the shape of a scalar dimension (the absolute meaning of the word suggests a high degree; e.g. många ‘many’, normal ‘normal’, svart ‘black’) or it involves some kind of limit that must be surpassed (the absolute meaning of the word suggest that some minimal attainment has been exceeded: Arbeta ‘work’ or anstränga ‘strain’ are used only if a sufficient amount of effort is being invested). For these words, x-och-x implies moving down on the scale or perhaps below the limit, or somehow restricting the application to specific contexts (types B-F for ny in Table 1). We also find words with a meaning potential that includes several central denotative or connotative aspects, rather than one dominant core dimension. Among these are kan ‘can’, bil ‘car’, altare ‘altar’.
If the word $x$ has a meaning that suggests a sort of prototype (bil ‘car’), the downgrading of $x$-och-$x$ often involves downgrading in some dimensions of its prototypical meaning. However, the boundaries between categories seem to be construable in terms of one abstract dimension; for example, referents can be more or less ‘car-like’.\footnote{In exceptional cases, as in example (2), the subsequent clause after the $x$-och-$x$ segment itself is omitted. Here, some kind of scale is strongly implied, and projected by the $x$-och-$x$ segment.}

What we just called “significant properties” may include ‘connotative’ aspects. Furthermore, some lexemes frequently activate presuppositional aspects (slippa ‘escape, be spared (from)’, flytta ‘move’). Finally, we found that ny ‘new’ may in fact turn out to be comparatively complex, in that it may have features of all these main categories.

By way of summary, the functional potential of $x$-och-$x$ seems to involve the profiling or construing of scalar dimensions that are relevant in the situated context. There are certain lexical items that are more inherently compatible with this (‘many’, ‘new’, etc.), and other items can be made compatible with it (‘car’, etc.).

9. General discussion and conclusions

Our main mission in this article has been to provide some empirical substantiations of the notion of meaning potential. The purpose of this final section is to further explain our position within meaning potential theory. In particular, we shall comment on issues of contextuality, abstractness, richness and polysemy.


The semantics of natural languages can hardly be determined by purely ‘theoretical’ arguments, as when Cappelen & Lepore (2005) propose that communication would not be possible, unless we presuppose a contextually ‘insensitive’ semantics. In fact, these authors never try to explain what takes place in actual communication. By contrast, usage-based studies\footnote{‘Usage-based’ means, for us, that the study is based primarily on data from authentic (attested) language use. It appears that many scholars who call their studies ‘usage-based’ continue to use almost exclusively made-up sentences in fictive contexts. For some of them, the inclusion of frequency-of-use considerations seems to be only criterion for being ‘usage-based’. For an overview, see Croft & Cruse 2004: 291ff.} seem to suggest that sense-making in context involves dynamic accomplishments that would not be possible unless language itself is dialogical, that is, designed to interact with contexts in actual communication and cognition. “Semantic flexibility” is “essential” for lexical items (Sinclair 2004: 146), and “[any] word becomes associated with a meaning through its repeated occurrence in similar contexts” (ibid.: 161). We would add: Words become associated with varied meanings in different kinds of context, i.e. they have meaning potentials.

Meaning potentials constitute knowledge that language users make use of in actual, authentic usage events. We have chosen some data, $x$-och-$x$ usage events from the daily communicative practices of speakers and writers, in which they display an ability to perform partial semantic analyses of words ($x$’es) as resources in their language. Language users discuss the semantic affordances of these resources in relation to their current communicative needs and demands.
Situated usages and interpretations of a word or a construction are usually both cognitively (or semantically) regular and situationally (pragmatically) motivated. This can be explained if the semantics of the word is not just an abstract schema, but an open and flexible, yet relatively stable, meaning potential that interacts with contextual factors in giving rise to situated meanings. On the other hand, it is not enough to say that situated sense is made up locally, in each specific context of occurrence.

Meaning potential theory has similarities with a Construction Grammar approach (e.g. Fillmore et al. 1988). We have described the interaction and compatibility between the meaning potentials of the lexical item (here: ny) and the schematic idiom (here: x-och-x), something which contributes strongly to the situated meanings of ny-och-ny utterances, in ways that are partly parallel to Goldberg’s (1995) account of the semantic interactions between specific verbs and larger constructions (argument structures). However, we would of course emphasise the importance of extra-linguistic contextual factors too.

We have pointed to interactions between language (meaning potentials) and contexts, and between lexis and grammar. As regards the second-mentioned aspect, we have pointed to the interplay between the meaning potentials of different linguistic resources, when these resources are co-selected (Deppermann 2005) in actual contexts. In our case, the functional potential of x-och-x interacts with the meaning potential of x. Thus, for example, in a specific context, x-och-x foregrounds certain aspects of the meaning of ny, and conversely, ny – being a special type of lexical item – seems to exploit partly different aspects of x-och-x than do other kinds of words. This has several implications for a general theory of semantics. One is that it speaks against a theory of strict compositionality, that is, the assumption that the meaning of a complex expression could be derived only from the full (and invariant) sets of fixed semantic features of constituent expressions, plus their syntactic combination (in abstract terms).


Some of the researchers who propose a notion of meaning potential of lexical meaning, both those who treat the concept at some length (Allwood 2003) and those who mention it more in passing (Zlatev 2003; Kilgariff 2003), seem to adopt a contextualist position which is diametrically opposite to a contextually ‘insensitive’ semantics. They think of it simply as the sum of all the usages (or usage types) that are known to be possible and remembered by the individual or the speech community. Such a view can come close to denying that there are semantic entities at the lexeme level (‘word senses’) at all (cf. Kilgariff op.cit.). Situated sense-making would become a mapping between expressions and situation types.

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26 Strictly speaking, these are of course not interactions between meaning potentials and contexts, but between the language user’s knowledge of meaning potentials and his/her apperception of the situation in its various dimensions.

27 We assume, of course, that some loose form of compositionality is needed for assigning interpretations to new complex expressions. But strict compositionality is impossible. First, we can of course not compute interpretations of situated utterance tokens without contextual information. Secondly, we agree with scholars in cognitive linguistics and construction grammar (e.g. Goldberg 1995: 13ff.) that strict compositionality does not hold on an abstract ‘structural’ level either; specific constructions have semantic properties that cannot be compositionally derived.

28 Zlatev’s term is ‘use potential’.
We agree of course that words do not have ‘meanings’ of the same kind as situated utterances have, i.e. meanings that are communicatively relevant to language users in situ. This is one reason why we talk about meaning potentials instead. But this is not to say that there is no lexical semantics.

Allwood\(^{29}\) does not appear to deny that meanings are unstructured, but he suggests that meaning potentials, at the level of language as a set of resources, remain fairly unstructured, and that structure is assigned in the situated ‘concept determinations’ (Allwood 1998) and by the particular individual language users. We would say that what is determined in situ are precisely the situated meanings, or, in Carston’s (2002) terms, the ‘ad-hoc concepts’, not the meaning potentials. (On the other hand, meaning potentials may get changed over time, as a consequence of many events of situated meaning (or ‘concept’) determinations.)

Language as (partially) shared is an emergent phenomenon based on abstraction from and pattern-recognition in many structured usage events. Language users have abstracted knowledge of linguistic resources (lexical items, grammatical construction methods), but the process of abstraction is not a private one; it is performed largely in and through social interaction, when the linguistic resources are tried out in new situations and thereby assigned structure. The \(x\)-och-\(x\) events are themselves (a tiny) part of this long-term process. Individual differences in meaning potentials are arguably relatively peripheral.

Language users do not map expressions directly to situation types (cf. above), but they relate to and use their abstracted knowledge, relying on it, being constrained by it, but also negotiating, extending and playing with it, \(in\ situ\). In \(x\)-och-\(x\) usage events, and other metalinguistic practices, they display their abilities in part overtly. In other cases, the language user’s work with the semantics of the linguistic resources is more covert, but must still be assumed to occur. Thus, we do not believe that the conception of meaning potentials as mere lists of usages (or clusters of such usages) is supported by empirical facts.\(^{30}\)

We alluded earlier to the idea that there be no word meanings in the lexicon. In fact, Sinclair (2004) too includes a chapter entitled “The empty lexicon”, seemingly suggesting that the word itself is empty and its meanings provided by collocates and other contextual phenomena (for him primarily in its linguistic environment). But Sinclair obviously does not propose that the lexical item is empty. Such an idea would result in a \textit{reductio ad absurdum}: If any given word in focus is itself empty and its semantics derived from its collocates, the same would hold for these collocate words, and due to \textit{their} emptiness, they cannot provide the meaning required. But we would contend that the lexical item does not only have its core of referential and descriptive meaning; its meaning potential also includes its structured liabilities to combine with particular kinds of (other) linguistic as well as extra-linguistic contextual resources.

However, as we have emphasised throughout our account, the assumption of structured meaning potentials does not mean that these potentials must be entirely coherent and integrated. On the contrary, they are open (but again, not endlessly open) to situated negotiation. Not all meaning aspects can be satisfied at the same time, and potentials may include tensions and partial contradictions. Yet, we have suggested that there are core aspects, distinctions between denotative and connotative aspects, as well as presuppositional aspects. Other points (that we could not pursue here, because it

\(^{29}\) Allwood (1998, 2003) and personal communication.

would necessitate much more data) are the possible links between parts of meaning potentials and particular communicative activity types and topical domains.

9.3. Richness

We also argue that meaning potentials contain more semantic content than just abstract schemas. This seems to be opposed to a common assumption among pragmaticists, e.g. within relevance theory (Carston 2002), who adopt a ‘minimalist’ ‘underspecified’ semantics (Carston: ‘underdeterminacy’). The latter kind of theory would presumably try to derive many of our subsenses in meaning potentials through pragmatic enrichment.

One variant of a ‘minimalist’ semantic theory could argue as follows. Take the meaning of svart ‘black’, for example as used in excerpt (15). One might propose that this simply involves a negotiation about specific referents (here: Figures or backgrounds on a computer screen) under situated circumstances, that is, whether these referents can be described as being black or not. According to this argument, this is not a negotiation of the meaning of ‘black’, which remains given and constant; everybody knows that ‘black’ is different from ‘grey’ and other colours. We too agree that there is a perceptual-cognitive core meaning aspect of ‘black’ in Swedish svart (or English black). However, in a usage-based theory like ours, the meaning (potential) of svart or black is not just a fixed, definitorial sense. It also comprises vast ‘encyclopedic’ knowledge about what in the world can be described as (more or less) ‘black’, that is, have the words svart or black used about them, under particular circumstances. For example, we have knowledge about practices of using svart (black) about backgrounds on computer screens.

In general, a ‘minimalist’ theory (of a systematically underspecified semantics) seems to adopt unilaterally a recipient’s perspective on language usage. It may indeed be possible to understand most utterances in context, even with a relatively underspecified semantics. And surely, pragmatic enrichment always takes place. But for a speaker to know his or her language well, he or she must have access to many more linguistic conventions for normal idiomatic language use. Thus, language users seem to have acquired knowledge of specifications of meaning that they have encountered recurrently. Such recurrent specifications have become entrenched, and they develop into routine-like knowledge about the lexical item itself (cf. Deppermann 2005: 313). In other words, they are ‘available’ (cf. Recanati 2004: 20) as parts of the meaning potentials that language users have stored. This speaks for a ‘maximalistic’ (cf. Recanati 2004)31, rather than minimalistic (Cappelen & Lepore 2005), semantics.

By way of summary, the meaning potential of a linguistic resource is both abstract and rich.32 In situated meaning-determination, it is subjected to pragmatic

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31 Recanati (op.cit.: 20-22 et passim). Recanati mentions ”semantic potentials” several times (97, incl. fn. 33, 141, 146, 148, 152), but does not appear to develop the notion sufficiently. However, he claims that the “semantic potential” is both “overly abstract” and “overly rich” (p. 146). He talks about “versions of [the] view which take the meaning of a word to consist both in some abstract schema in need of elaboration [i.e. pragmatic enrichment/KN&PL] and a large store of encyclopaedic representations most of which must be screened off as irrelevant, on any particular use” (p. 140; italics in original). We would hypothesise that empirical explorations may lead us to assume that meaning potentials are indeed both abstract and rich.

enrichment and selective screening of situationally relevant sense aspects. Thus, we look upon situated sense-making as both selectional and constructional in nature. At the same time, when particular usages are often repeated, they may become entrenched, and thus conventionalised and lexicalised parts of the meaning potential. This takes place in interplay with contextual factors, both across different situational contexts and diachronically.

9.4. Polysemy or monosemy?

We assume that language users make abstractions and constructions, i.e. they assign more structure than would be present in mere usage lists. It may be difficult to pinpoint exactly how far this abstraction goes. It seems safe to say, however, that lexicologists tend to carry abstraction and construction further (for good, practical reasons) than ordinary language users. But there is probably no sharp boundary where language users’ constructions end and linguists’ constructions take over.

This brings us to our last point, which concerns the vexed question if linguistic expressions are monosemous or polysemous at the lexical-semantic level (we assume that everybody would concede that there are pragmatic variations across situations). For example, Cappelen & Lepore (2005), in arguing for their ‘insensitive semantics’, propose that linguistic communication across situations would be difficult or even impossible, unless each specific word in itself always means the same. Conversely, many would suggest that words have to develop polysemy, precisely in order to provide for appropriate communication in diverse situations. (As we all know, polysemy is the implicit theory behind many dictionaries, which are designed to be practically used by people.). Our hunch, based on empirical studies such as the one reported here, is that monosemy vs. polysemy is too coarse a distinction. Furthermore, we think that some progress can be made if indeed we use more of empirical data.

The issue about monosemy or polysemy can be understood as an issue of drawing the boundary between (lexical) semantics and pragmatics. On the one hand, a word, such as Swedish *ny* or English *new*, is intuitively perceived as one single word (with lexically more or less the same meaning), but on the other hand, it is a fact that there is semantic variation across situations. Is this variation due to situated modulation of one meaning (i.e. purely pragmatic enrichments) (monosemy), or is it present in the lexicalised (conventionalised) structure of the language in question (cf. polysemy)?

In our analysis, *ny* appears as monosemous at one level. The varying meanings that we have found (sub-sense units with near-sense properties, Croft & Cruse 2004: 116) do not affect the importance of the core aspect. (It should be added, though, that words with other kinds of semantics than *ny* are arguably polysemous in a more radical way.) At the same time, the meaning potential of *ny* seems to involve more than this core aspect. The other semantic aspects (see Table 1) are not simply contextual modulations or purely occasional conceptualisations; they are types of situated interpretations of which some have become entrenched and conventionalised. Therefore, the theory of meaning potentials, in our version, does entail at least some degree of polysemy.

At the same time, the theory of meaning potentials does not force to choose between monosemy and polysemy (a point which has been made previously by Allwood 2003). There is a monosemous tendency (presence of core aspects, and associated connotations and presuppositions) living alongside with a polysemous tendency.
(presence of lexicalised microsenses, which can be exploited in context), and foregrounding or backgrounding can happen to all of these kinds of sense aspects. From this perspective, the issue of monosemy versus polysemy therefore appears to be something of a theoretical ”pseudo-problem”.

References


SAOB = Ordbok öfver svenska språket utgifven av Svenska Akademien, 1898-. Stockholm. [“Dictionary of the Swedish language by the Swedish Academy”].


