Language, Linguistics and Literature: Meaning Aspects

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Abstract

The current writer aims to explore the semantic or meaning aspects of collected English vocabulary items, particularly the semantic dependency (how meanings are defined) and the semantic range (which member of a word or lexical item pair has more meanings), which are relevant to English language learning-teaching, linguistics and literature. Data consisting of lexical items and their respective definitions or meanings were retrieved from various online English-English dictionaries, such as the *Cambridge Dictionary,* the *Macquarie Dictionary, Merriam-Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. The collected lexical items, 60 adjective-verb pairs, were examined in order to discover whether semantic dependency and semantic range applied consistently. It is expected that the study results would enable teachers, instructors, facilitators, lecturers and learners of the English language to understand better the interrelated aspects of meanings in language learning-teaching, linguistics and literature as a whole.

Keywords: dictionary, lexical item, meaning, semantic dependency

Introduction

As a category of (major total) conversion (henceforth MTC) or zero-derivation, English adjective-verb (A-V) pairs remain a challenging topic for us to tackle. Even though MTC has been investigated for over 100 years, it may still be considered as "a sort of battleground over which various theoretical camps have fought over the years" (Lieber, 2005: 418). Regarding the directionality of (major total) conversion (cf Bauer and Valera, 2005: 11-12), and its meaning aspects, for example, "previous research findings have been inconsistent" (Bram, 2011: 1). The term *directionality* refers to which member of a pair comes first. Some influential investigators of English MTC, as Bram (2011: 1) lists, include Sweet (1900), Bladin (1911), Biese (1941), Zandvoort (1957), Marchand (1960), Pennanen (1971), Adams (1973, 2001), Kiparsky (1982), Bauer (1983, 2003, 2008), Cetnarowska (1993), Don (1993), Štekauer (1996), Haspelmath (2002), Ljung (2003), Plag (2003), Lieber (2004, 2005), Bauer and Valera (2005), Balteiro (2007a, b), and Nagano (2008). Accordingly, the current writer intends to explore the semantics or meaning aspects of collected A-V pairs, particularly the consistency of semantic dependency and semantic range.

Since "that there is a 'natural' conjunction between literature and linguistics is a truism regularly voiced by scholars in either discipline: after all, both fields deal with the raw material of human communication and expression, language" (Gerbig & Müller-Wood, 2006: 85), the current writer would also discuss the connections between literature, linguistics and language (learning-teaching). Rather surprisingly, it turns out researchers have yet to examine the related fields in a more systematic manner in order to yield conceptual and implementable results. It is also essential to avoid contradictory ideas between literature and linguistics, for instance, because "both in research and teaching contexts, reciprocal prejudices keep the disciplinary siblings of linguistics and literary studies apart: while one is seen to be empirical and descriptive, the other is considered interpretive and analytical" (Gerbig & Müller-Wood, 2006: 85). Eventually, it is expected that school teachers, instructors, facilitators, lecturers and learners of the English language can see more clearly the direct relations of aspects of meanings in language learning-teaching, linguistics and literature.

Related Studies

In the following, the current writer presents previous studies related to major total conversion (MTC) pairs involving adjectives and verbs and issues regarding linguistics, literature and language (learning-teaching). MTC is "the process and at the same time the result of deriving a new lexical item (an item which is listed separately in the dictionary) by modifying the part of speech of the base or input without marking the modification overtly" (Bram, 2011: 5). More specifically, English MTC consists of three types, namely, "noun-to-verb or N, V (denominal verb), verb-to-noun or V, N (deverbal noun) and adjective-to-verb or A, V (deadjectival verb)" (Bram, 2011: 5). In the present context, to be feasible, the focus is on adjective-to-verb pairs only, such as *clean, empty* and *warm* (which function as adjectives and verbs).

To explore the meaning aspects of adjective-to-verb pairs, the present writer would first clarify the terms *semantic dependency* (SD) and *semantic range* (SR). "SD involves the inclusion or use of the base form in the core meaning or definition of the converted counterpart. SR covers two aspects, namely, the total number of senses (and unmatched senses)" (Bram, 2011: 153). Note that the core meaning is also referred to as the central meaning. This is in line with the definition in the *Macquarie Dictionary* online, which states: "The central meaning of each part of speech is put first; this is generally the commonest meaning. The usual order after the central meaning is: figurative or transferred meanings, specialized meanings, obsolete, archaic or rare meanings" (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 2003: xx). How are the central meanings collected? "The total number of senses and the central sense or core meaning of each MTC pair candidate was retrieved by typing in a key word (an MTC candidate, for instance, *bottle*) in the search box of the online dictionaries" (Bram, 2011: 141). Based on the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (*NODE*) (1998: ix), "the core meaning is the one that represents the most literal sense that the word has in ordinary modern usage".

Next, let us focus on issues involving linguistics, literature and language (learning-teaching) – of the English language in particular. Cannon (1960: 255) says "… linguistics might also be useful in some way to the teaching and deeper understanding of poetry and other literature seems to be widespread". Nevertheless, "many linguists are not interested in foregoing their investigations into the 'pure' aspects of language in order to consider applications of their findings", concludes Cannon (1960: 255), "just as many non-linguists have the interest but not the special knowledge required to make such applications". Interestingly, Bednarek (2007: 1) presents a report "on the teaching of an interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar on English linguistics and literature at the University of Augsburg (Germany)." In the report, Bednarek (2007: 1) says that the focus was "19th century women's fiction" seen "from literary and linguistic perspectives: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*".

Historically, linguistics started to obtain its own "distinct identity" in the United States in the 1930s and "from the very start, it has seemed natural, especially to non-linguists, that insights gained from research on language should be applicable, above all, to the teaching of languages, native and nonnative" (Heny, 1987: 196). The situation of linguistics development in Indonesia has presumably been less favorable and less lively than that of the US. Heny (1987: 196) points out that it is rarely possible to implement linguistic research findings in language teaching. If this is the case, results from linguistic research, including pure linguistics, theoretical linguistics in general and morphology and syntax in particular, for example, would be regarded by language teachers and educators as irrelevant and inapplicable because such linguistic investigations yield "abstract or formal" results which carry no "practical implications" (cf Heny, 1987: 196). Once again, if this is true, pure linguistics seems to be disconnected with literature and language learning-teaching of all languages in general and of the English language in particular. Possibly, what Heny (1987: 196) says still remains valid, namely "Linguists engaged in pure research have generally had little professional interest in applying their results to practical problems". Is this an unfortunate situation? Or does it mean that pure linguists and applied linguists have their own specific objectives and tasks? Other questions might include: Is there any connection between (pure and applied) linguistics and language learning-teaching? How can literature be connected with (pure and applied linguistics)? It is fortunate that "there exists a field that might seem to

bridge the gap between pure linguistic research and its practical utility: applied linguistics" (Heny, 1987: 196). Nevertheless, the term *applied linguistics* might fail, as Heny (1987: 196) says, to capture the roles of this particular linguistics field; "It is not primarily engaged in the application of linguistic research to practical problems …" Historically, as Heny, (1987: 196) points out, applied linguistics has been closer to "pedagogy, communication studies, and aspects of psychology and sociology", than to (pure) linguistics.

Data and Comments

As stated in the introduction section above, this study aims to examine the semantic dependency and semantic range involving adjective-to-verb pairs, in particular their consistency. Note that being consistent means, firstly, that semantic dependency (the base form – adjective is included in the definition of the verb) exists or is observable in the dictionary definitions or meanings and secondly that the base form – adjective has more definitions/meanings than the verb. The data, consisting of 60 pairs involving adjectives and verbs, were collected from the online *Macquarie Dictionary* (henceforth *MD), Merriam-Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary (MWD)*, the online *Cambridge Dictionaries (CD),* and the online *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OD)*. Table 1 below lists the 60 A-to-V pairs collected for this study.

Table 1 Adjective-Verb Pairs

No.	A>V Pairs		
1	better	31	lower
2	black	32	muddy
3	blind	33	near
4	bloody	34	numb
5	blue	35	okay/ok
6	blunt	36	opaque
7	brown	37	open
8	clean	38	pale
9	clear	39	parallel
10	complete	40	pretty
11	corrupt	41	purple
12	crimson	42	ready
13	crisp	43	reverse
14	dark	44	secure
15	dim	45	shallow
16	dirty	46	slim
17	dizzy	47	slow
18	double	48	smart
19	dull	49	smooth
20	empty	50	sour
21	equal	51	tame
22	even	52	tender
23	fat	53	tense
24	free	54	tidy
25	green	55	total
26	grey (US: gray)	56	triple
27	hollow	57	untidy
28	humble	58	warm
29	idle	59	wet
30	lame	60	yellow

The current writer investigated the semantic dependency and semantic range of the alphabetically listed A, V pairs above by checking one by one the definitions or meanings of the adjectives and of the verbs provided by the online *Macquarie Dictionary (MD)* and the online *Merriam-Webster's Third*

Unabridged Dictionary (MWD). The writer typed the keywords, namely adjectives and verbs (A, V pairs) in the search boxes of the two dictionaries, and then copied and pasted the core/central meanings to check the semantic dependency. As for the semantic range, the writer calculated and then recorded the number of meanings of each adjective and of each verb in tables, as partly shown in Tables 2-5 below.

Table 2 Semantic Dependency and Semantic Range Based on *MWD*

No	A-V	*MWD*: A	# Def	*MWD*: Vi	# Def	*MWD*: Vt	# Def
1	better	of higher quality	3	become **better**	1	to make **better**	3
2	black	of the color black : having the color of soot or coal	15	to become **black**	2	to make **black**	3
3	blind	lacking the sense of sight by natural defect or by deprivation	10	N/A	N/A	to make **blind**	5
4	bloody	smeared or stained with blood	6	N/A	N/A	to make **bloody**	1
5	blue	of the color blue	9	to turn **blue**	1	to make **blue** in color	2
6	blunt	having a thick edge or point : not sharp or keen	4	to become dull or less sharp	1	to make (as an edge or point) less sharp	3
7	brown	of the color brown	4	to become **brown**	1	to make **brown** or dusky	2
8	clean	free from or freed of dirt, filth, refuse, or remains	10	become **clean**	1	to make **clean** or free of dirt or any foreign or offensive matter	4
9	clear	easily visible or distinguishable without blurring or becoming obscure	5	to become **clear**, bright, or transparent	4	to make **clear**, transparent, or translucent	5
10	complete	possessing all necessary parts, items, components , or elements	4	N/A	N/A	to bring to an end often into or as if into a finished or perfected state	2

Note: def = definition

Considering the space availability, only 10 adjective-verb pairs, together with their SD and SR details based the online *Merriam-Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary (MWD)*, are displayed in Table 2 above. As observable above, the SR exists or is consistent in seven pairs (two are inconsistent); in other words, seven out of the ten adjectives have more meanings/definitions than their verb counterparts, except *better* (Adj: 3; V: 4), *blunt* (Adj: 4; V: 4) and *clear* (Adj: 5; V: 9). Regarding their SD, eight of the pairs are consistent (the base adjective form is included or repeated in the meaning of its verb counterpart); Two of them, namely *blunt* and *complete*, are inconsistent.

Table 3 Semantic Dependency and Semantic Range Based on *MD*

No	A-V	*MD*: A	# Def	*MD*: Vi	# Def	*MD*: Vt	# Def
1	better	of superior quality or excellence	5	N/A	N/A	to make **better**; improve; increase the good qualities of	2
2	black	without brightness or colour; absorbing all or nearly all the rays emitted by a light source	14	to become **black**; take on a **black** colour	1	to make **black**; put **blac**k on	3
3	blind	lacking the sense of sight	14	N/A	N/A	to make **blind**, as by injuring, dazzling, or bandaging the eyes	4
4	bloody	stained with blood	6	N/A	N/A	to stain with **blood**	1
5	blue	of the colour blue	7	N/A	1	to make **blue**; dye a **blue** colour	3

No	A-V	MD: A	# Def	MD: Vi	# Def	MD: Vt	# Def
6	blunt	having an obtuse, thick, or dull edge or tip; rounded; not sharp	3	N/A	N/A	to make **blunt**	2
7	brown	of the colour brown	3	to become **brown**	1	to make **brown**	2
8	clean	free from dirt or filth; unsoiled; unstained	22	to perform or to undergo a process of **cleaning**	1	to make **clean**	1
9	clear	free from darkness, obscurity, or cloudiness; light	20	to become **clear**	2	to make **clear**; free from darkness, cloudiness, muddiness, indistinctness, confusion, uncertainty ...	15
10	complete	having all its parts or elements; whole; entire; full	4	N/A	N/A	to make **complete**; make whole or entire	3

Next, let us observe the SR and SD based on the online *Macquarie Dictionary* (*MD*). In Table 3 above, the SR exists or is consistent in nine pairs; in other words, nine of the ten adjectives have more meanings/definitions than their verb counterparts, except *brown* (Adj: 3; V: 3). Regarding their SD, all pairs are consistent (the base adjective forms are included or repeated in the meanings of their verb counterparts).

Table 4 Semantic Dependency and Semantic Range Based on *OD*

No.	OD: # Adj Defs	OD: # V Defs	V 'Core' Definition/Meaning
1	better: 5	2	to be **better** or do something **better** than somebody/something else
2	black: 9	2	to make something **black**
3	blind: 6	3	to permanently destroy somebody's ability to see
4	clean: 11	4	to become **clean**
5	clear: 16	17	to remove something that is not wanted or needed from a place

Note: defs = definitions

In Table 4, it is observable that the SR and SD based on the online *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (*OD*). Only five pairs are listed as representatives – due to space availability. The SR exists or is consistent in four pairs; in other words, four of the five adjectives have more meanings/definitions than their verb counterparts, except *clear* (Adj: 16; V: 17). Regarding their SD, three pairs, *better, black* and *clean*, are consistent (the base adjective forms are included in the meanings of their verb counterparts).

Table 5 Semantic Dependency and Semantic Range Based on *CD*

No.	CD: # Adj Defs	CD: # V Defs	V 'Core' Definition/Meaning
1	better: 3	2	to become **clean**
2	black: 4	2	to put a **black** substance on something or to make something **black**
3	blind: 3	2	to make someone unable to see, permanently or for a short time
4	clean: 6	3	to become **clean**
5	clear: 9	9	to remove or get rid of whatever is is blocking or filling something, or to stop being blocked or full

Now, let us refer to Table 5 above, which shows the SR and SD based on the online *Cambridge Dictionaries* (*OD*). Considering the available space, only five pairs are listed as representatives. It is observable that the SR exists or is consistent in four pairs; in other words, four of the five adjectives have more meanings/definitions than their verb counterparts, except *clear* (Adj: 9; V: 9). Regarding their SD, three pairs, *better, black* and *clean*, are consistent (the base adjective forms are included or repeated in the meanings of their verb counterparts). Note that based *OD* and *CD*, the SR and SD of the five adjective-to-verb pairs, *better, black, blind, clean* and *clear*, are practically the same.

To observe the connections between literature, language (learning-teaching) and linguistics, how about referring to the two quotations below? First is part of Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods*, which reads as follows:

> *Whose woods these are I think I know.*
> *His house is in the village though;*
> *He will not see me stopping here*
> *To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

"Now what can we say about the poem's language? It is rather simple, colloquial language, language that might be used in ordinary conversation. The first line is "inverted" -- and so departs slightly from standard syntax" (Schwartz, 1970: 189). To be more specific, the four lines of the poem, which is well-known in English literature, can be used in the English language learning-teaching processes to discuss, for example, English syntax in general and grammar (and morphology) in particular. Certainly, it is also possible to focus on the semantics or meanings of words used in Frost's poem entitled *Stopping by Woods*. For example, what is the difference between the verbs *see* and *watch* semantically?

Last, let us refer to the following quotation called "Poems with Adjectives" and concise explanations and instruction: "Adjectives are describing words. If I say "Tom is playing with a red ball." then the word red describes the ball. Write a poem by repeating the first line but each time adding another adjective" (littlepoets.wordpress.com/tag/poems-with-adjectives).

> On my way to the zoo I saw a bear.
> It was a *brown* bear.
> It was an *ugly* brown bear
> It was a *wild,* ugly, brown bear
> It was an *angry*, wild, ugly, brown bear
> It was a *hungry*, angry, wild, ugly, brown bear
> It was an *escaped*, hungry, angry, wild, ugly, brown bear
> And it wanted to eat me!
>
> (source: http://littlepoets.wordpress.com/tag/poems-with-adjectives, accessed on 10 June 2014)

In order to identify the interrelation between literature, linguistics and language learning-teaching based on the poem and its adjectives, what can learners and teachers or lecturers do? One excellent alternative is to explore the semantics or meanings, particularly the semantic dependency and semantic range of the adjective-to-verb pairs, for instance, *brown* (*OED*: As an Adj 1325 in and V in 1300) and *ugly* (*OED*: As an Adj in 1250 and V in 1740). Further, in a classroom context, teachers or lecturers and learners of the English language can choose to discuss the adjectives used in *Poems with Adjectives* in a literature class meeting. Semantically, the existing adjectives can be examined or checked based on or by referring to comprehensive English-English dictionaries. By so doing, the connections between literature, linguistics and language (learning-teaching) appear to be obvious.

Conclusion

To wrap up, the semantic dependency (SD) and semantic range (SD) of adjective-to-verb pairs can be explored and the findings can be implemented in or related to literature and language learning-teaching of the English language. Based on the online *Macquarie Dictionary* (henceforth *MD*), *Merriam-Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary (MWD)*, the online *Cambridge Dictionaries (CD),* and the

online *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OD),* the SD and SR of the collected adjective-to-verb (A-V) pairs tend to be consistent as a whole, namely the base forms of the adjectives are included or repeated in the definitions of the verb counterparts (consistent SD) and the base forms of the adjectives have more definitions than those of their verb counterparts. Finally, A-V pairs, together with N-V and V-N, belong to the so called major total conversion (MTC) in the English language.

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