

Understanding the concept MEANING POTENTIAL

A discussion based on a corpus study of the Swedish verbs of putting

Åke Viberg, Uppsala University
Ake.Viberg@lingfil.uu.se

The interpretation of a word is achieved via a dynamic construal of meaning (Croft and Cruse 2004) based on the assumption that meaning is not fully represented in the lexicon but is created online in language use. The interpretation of a lexical item when used in a specific context arises through an interaction between two types of information: (1) The conceptual representation of the word (purport or meaning potential) and (2) a set of constraints on the interpretation. The meaning potential of a word (see Allwood 2003 and Hanks 2013, 65-83 for discussion) is used to account for the total set of its meanings. To what extent can the uses of a frequent and polysemous word be systematically related and what role do various constructions play? Should we rather talk of a usage potential consisting of a network of meanings and constructions? These questions will be discussed with reference to a corpus-based study of the basic Swedish verbs of putting which all belong to the fifty most frequent verbs in the language and have a wide range of uses. Swedish has three basic verbs of putting: *lägga* 'lay', *ställa* (put-stand) and *sätta* (put-attach). The basic semantic distinctions between these verbs when they refer to the motion of physical objects in physical space have been described in a rather detailed way in written corpora by Viberg (1998, 2015) and in elicited oral production by Gullberg & Burenhult (2012), the latter as part of a broad typological investigation of the putting event (Kopecka & Narasimhan 2012).

The present study is based on data from the Swedish Language Bank and on the complete English Swedish Parallel Corpus (ESPC, Altenberg & Aijmer 2000), which makes it possible to make comparisons with the English verbs of putting. The aim is to cover the complete spectrum of uses similar to what is done in Pauwels' (2010) detailed cognitive-linguistic study of the English verbs of putting *put*, *lay*, *set* and *place*. Swedish differs from English in lacking a general verb like *put* but still uses the verbs of putting in many abstract contexts, for example to refer to mental events (*lägga på minnet* 'remember' lit. 'put on the memory') or to speech acts (*lägga fram ett förslag* 'put (lit. lay) forward a proposal'). One particular characteristic of Swedish that deserves to be discussed is that verb particles can be used both as free words and as the first element of compound verbs. The alternation is not primarily grammatically conditioned as in German or in Dutch but produces a stylistic (e.g. *framlägga ett förslag* 'put forward a proposal') or semantic contrast, for example *sätta ut sina skor* 'put out one's shoes' (in a hotel, to be shined) and *utsätta sig för en extrem fara* 'expose (lit.out-set) oneself to extreme danger'. The compound forms usually have an abstract meaning and are characteristic of more formal registers To what extent should the meaning of the compound forms be regarded as part of the meaning potential?

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Electronic sources

ESPC. The English Swedish Parallel Corpus. For a description, see:
<http://www.englund.lu.se/content/view/66/127/>

SLB: Swedish Language Bank (Språkbanken) <http://spraakbanken.gu.se/>.