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semantic fields, corpus linguistics, lexical typology, contrastive studies, English, Swedish

BREAKING THE LAW AND CUTTING THE DEFICIT. A contrastive study of the patterns of polysemy of Cutting and Breaking verbs in English and Swedish

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This paper presents a corpus-based contrastive study of the semantic field of Cutting and Breaking (C&B) verbs in Swedish and English. It is a continuation of earlier studies by Viberg (1985, 2007, *forthc.*) of C&B verbs, which were primarily concerned with the literal meanings as separation verbs similar to the well-known typological studies in Majid & Bowerman (eds. 2007). Swedish makes several obligatory distinctions, where English can use one verb, e.g. *cut* has three major correspondences depending on the Instrument: *skära* (KNIFE), *klippa* (SCISSORS) and *hugga* (AX). *Break* corresponds to *bryta* when it refers to ‘break by bending’, whereas other meanings are expressed with the particle *sönder* ‘asunder’ in combination with various verbs. This difference affects the patterns of the non-literal meanings, which are the focus in this paper. The analysis is based on the coding of all examples of C&B verbs in samples from large corpora. Initially, translation correspondences between English and Swedish were studied in Subtitles 2011 (Sketch Engine). These data were complemented with data from monolingual corpora, both because translation effects can be expected and because subtitles only represent one specific register (cf. Keuleers et al. 2010, Levshina 2017). Separate samples were drawn from two registers, Fiction and News in the British National Corpus (Sketch Engine). Comparable Swedish data representing Fiction and News were drawn from KORP (see Databases). Striking differences were found with respect to the prominence of various types of meaning, for example BodyHarm in the Subtitles (*cut off the head*) and Reduction in News (*cut the workforce*). Word sketches showing the most salient collocates serving as subjects and objects were also compared across languages. Since the English verbs *break* and *cut* have a very large number of meanings, the semantic analysis is carried out in two steps. The first consists of a classification of non-literal meanings according to target fields, for example Creation (*cut a moose out of wood*), Motion (*break up from camp, cut across the field*), Verbal Communication (*break the news, cut in* (into a conversation)) and Reduction (*cut the deficit*). In the second step, non-literal meanings belonging to a certain field are contrasted and analyzed with respect to their place within the target field. The non-literal meanings are regarded as the result of semantic shifts (Juvonen & Koptjevskaja Tamm 2015) and related to current studies of metonymy and metaphor (Riemer 2005, Sullivan 2013, Dancygier & Sweetser 2014, David 2017). When non-literal meanings of *cut* and *break* are regarded as the result of a chain of extensions, it turns out that this chain always starts with concrete separation, whereas several of the Swedish correspondences also have extensions based on hand actions that are components of the literal meanings as concrete separation verbs (cf. English *tear* ‘separate by pulling’).

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Databases

KORP. <http://spraakbanken.gu.se>

See also: Borin et al. (2012).

Sketch Engine: <http://sketchengine.co.uk>