

Construction of meaning in context Polysems and multi-facets items within noun phrases

Our researches focus on the semantics of natural languages in a cognitive perspective. We study more particularly the link between syntax and semantics in the construction of sense of complex expressions containing words with multiple meanings (noun, adjective or both).

The purpose of our communication concerns the French substantive *livre* (*book*) when it is combined with an adjective within a nominal phrase. Our goal is firstly to propose a conceptual modelling representing the semantic content of the item *livre*, and secondly to examine the way sense can be constructed in expressions composed of an adjective and that substantive, taking into account both semantic and syntactic structures.

According to our hypothesis, linguistic items are associated, into the mental lexicon of speakers-hearers, with an organized conceptual structure composed of numerous semantic pieces of information. *Book* is linked with two sets of conceptual semantic pieces of information (Cruse (2000) and Croft & Cruse (2004) call it facets). In context, each of them can be selected and activated. If the set *TOME* is activated, *livre* makes reference to a physical object constituted with several pages bound between two covers, for instance in the expression *un livre rouge* (*a red book*). When the set *CONTENU INFORMATIF* (*TEXT*) is selected, *livre* designates a group of ideas conveyed by that physical object, by example in *un livre polémique* (*a polemic book*). Besides, the two sets can also be activated, such as in the nominal phrase *un livre publié* (*a published book*). Knowing that and inspired by the theory of cognitive grammar established by R.W. Langacker (1987), re-used by D. Tuggy (1993), we can elaborate the semantic representation of the noun *livre* in a conceptual perspective. Thus, we reckon that the global semantic concept associated with *livre* is part of the schematic meaning of the noun and its two facets correspond to elaborations or instantiations of that semantic sense.

The analysis of the phrase *un livre curieux* (*a curious, strange book*) makes it possible to highlight the complex mechanisms of the sense construction process of expressions formed by words with multiple meanings. Indeed, the French adjective *curieux* is very polysemic and shows strong semantic variations:

- *curieux* with its active sense means 'Eager to learn', such as in the utterance *un enfant curieux de tout* (*a child who is curious about everything*). Somebody who is eager to learn about something experiences interest in that something. It is associated with the semantic piece of information [INTERESTED].
- *curieux* with its passive sense means 'Odd', such as in *elle habite une maison curieuse* (*she lives in a strange house*) or *un comportement curieux* (*a strange attitude*). Somebody or something being odd arouses interest. It is associated with the semantic piece of information [INTERESTING].

Therefore, the active and passive meanings (the instantiations of the schematic meaning) of the adjective *curieux* are linked by a common concept which can be [INTEREST] (its schematic meaning).

In a previous work, the systematic study of minimal pairs permitted us to find regularities in the sense construction of noun phrases combining *curieux* and a substantive. Thus, the position of the adjective into the nominal phrase (anteposition or postposition) and the noun category (/animate/ or /inanimate/) allow predicting which sense of *curieux* will be selected and activated.

	epithet adjective		predicative adjective
	anteposition	postposition	
noun /inanimate/	[INTERESTING] passive sense	[INTERESTING] passive sense	[INTERESTING] passive sense
noun /animate/	[INTERESTING] passive sense	? ?	? ?

Semantic regularities in the sense construction of expressions composed of the adjective *curieux* combined with a noun

We concluded that when *curieux* is an epithet adjective in postposition or anteposition combined with a noun /animate/, it always means ‘arouse interest’. However, within the only nominal phrase *livre curieux – curieux livre*, it is impossible to know which sets of semantic pieces of information is selected and activated for *livre*. For instance, *un livre curieux – un curieux livre* can make reference a book whose shape is triangular (activation of *TOME*), or to a book which seems not to be conventional as far as the narration, the scenario or the ideas written down are concerned (activation of *cont inf*). So that hearers must resort to a broader linguistic and even extra linguistic context to construct the sense of the expression.

For example, in the utterances *J’ai lu un livre curieux* (*I read a curious book*) and *J’ai vu un livre curieux* (*I saw a curious book*), hearers can determine which set of pieces of information is activated, respectively *CONTENU INFORMATIF* and *TOME*. Here, the verbs can select the pertinent set of pieces of information so that hearers can understand why it is a strange book.

To conclude, the semantico-cognitive analysis of the substantive *livre* and the study of its combinatorial with the adjective *curieux* lead us to underline the complex mechanisms of sense construction and utterance interpretation. Our conclusions might concern other adjectives and even lexical items belonging to other categories, such as nouns.

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