**CHAPTER 12**

Syntagmatic relations

12.1 Normal and abnormal co-occurrence

It is necessary tomake a distinction between two types of interaction between meaningfulelements in a discourse. We shall distinguish the two types by the terms **discourse interaction** and **syntagmatic interaction.** We shall be eventually

concerned mainly with the latter type.

Consider the following sentence:

(I) John and Mary will be joined in holy matrimony next week: who's going

to get the spuds?

There are two sorts of oddness here. The first is the **register clash** between *holy*

*matrimony*and *spuds.* This can easily be cured:

(2) John and Mary will be joined in holy matrimony next week: who is going

to get the potatoes?

But we are still left with the difficulty of finding the relevance of potatoes toJohn and Mary's marriage. (There would be no problem if *potatoes was*replaced by *confetti,* or even, *rice.)* These are both aspects of **discourse interaction**,as in each case the clash, as we may call it, is not between one item andits most intimate syntactic neighbour. The **register clash** is relatively superficial.However, the irreconcilability of *marriage* and *potatoes* has a much deeper origin,to do with the construction of plausible scenarios involving the two concepts,and drawing on cultural knowledge, which we cannot go into here, but is notobviously syntactically governed.

Another distinction (**syntagmatic interaction)** needs to be made. There are two potential focusesof interest in studying syntagmatic semantic relations: one is whether, or towhat extent, a particular combination makes sense, the other is whether, orto what extent, a combination is normal or abnormal.

**12.2 Types of abnormality**

Two basic types of abnormality resulting from the combination of two senses

can be distinguished. The first is where meanings simply do not 'go together';

the second is when one meaning adds nothing new to another one with which

it is combined and thus appears unnecessary, or redundant. We shall call these

**clash**and **pleonasm,** respectively.

**12.2.1 Semantic clash**

The first distinction is between clashes which result from the non-satisfactionof  **collocational preferences,** and those which result from the non-satisfaction of **selectional preferences.** This latter distinction—between collocational and selectional preferences—depends on whether the preferencesin question are an inherent consequence of propositional content or not. Take the case *of My geraniums have kicked the bucket.* There is here a semanticclash between *geraniums* and *kicked the bucket:* for full normality, *kick thebucket* requires a human subject. But the propositional content of *kick thebucket* is the same as that of *die.* If a collocational preference is contravened, we may say that **inappropriateness** results: inappropriateness is then the lowest degree of clash.

If what is here called a selectional preference is contravened, the clash ismore serious. Two degrees of clash can just about be distinguished here. Consider, for example, *a tiny giant.* In Cruse (1986) this was called **paradox.** Paradox is alsoevident in the following: *It's too small tofit into this box, Rain falls upwards, usually, If you walk any faster, you'll bestanding still.* Paradoxes are typically 'correctable'.

The most serious degree of clash is **incongruity.** This is when the

discrepancy is so large that no sense can be extracted at all, without radical

reinterpretation. Since there is not even an inkling of sense, in the worst cases,

there is no feeling that the utterance could be corrected. Examples are:

purple gestures of rat milk

the sky's nipple is a dictionary

crystalline miasmas of safety-pins

in phonemic toe-buckets

**12.2.2 Pleonasm**

A pleonastic relation between two elements occurs when one of them seems

redundant, and appears not to add any semantic information not already

given by the other element. So, for instance:

(3) John kicked the ball with his foot.

Here *with his foot* adds nothing, since we know from *kick* what the instrument

of striking was. Pleonasm can be avoided either by omitting *with his foot:*

(4) John kicked the ball.

or by replacing *kick* with *strike*:

(5) John struck the ball with his foot.

Notice, however, that (6) is not pleonastic:

(6) John kicked the ball with his left foot.

This is because the phrase *with his left foot* now contains new information.

In some cases, repetition has an intensifying, rather than a pleonastic

effect:

(9) That is very, very good.

(10) Mary rushed quickly to the window.

Notice that the idea of "quickly" is part of the meaning of *rush,* which is why

we get a paradox if we qualify an act of rushing with the opposite term:

(11) ?Mary rushed slowly to the window.

**12.5 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations**

There are certain systematic connections between syntagmatic and paradigmatic

sense relations which are worth signalling.

**12.5.1 Pleonasm**

In cases of pleonasm, the oddness can in general be 'cured' by substituting one

of the words by a hyponym or hyponymous expression, or the other by a

superordinate.

(18) He kicked it with his foot. (pleonastic)

He kicked it with his *left* foot. (normal: *left foot* is hyponymous to*foot*)

He *struck* it with his foot. (normal: *struck* is superordinate to *kick)*

**12.5.2 Clash**

The severity of a clash can be roughly estimated by examining the minimal

change required to cure it. This enables us to put a little more flesh on the

notions of *inappropriateness, paradox,* and *incongruity.* Inappropriateness is a

type of clash which can be cured by substitution of one of the words by a

propositional synonym:

(19) The geranium passed away. (inappropriateness)

The geranium died. (normal: *died* is a propositional synonym of *passaway)*

Paradox is a more serious type of clash which can be cured by substituting

one of the words by an incompatible or immediate superordinate:

(20) *It's too small tofit into this box*. (paradox)

*It's too big tofit into this box*. (normal: *big*is an incompatible *of small)*

Incongruity is an incurable clash:

(21) powdered thrills

**12.8 Co-occurrence patterns between words**

It is a commonplace observation that words prefer some partners to others.

And some dictionaries take it upon themselves to impart what they call 'collocational information' to their readers. In this section we shall look at the

different factors (not excluding the semantic factors discussed above) which

govern the relative frequency of association of two (or more) words.

**12.8.1 Extralinguistic factors**

Some of the possible reasons for the greater affinity of A for X rather than Y

are not located in the language at all, but in the extralinguistic world. For

instance, one reason why *Jane fried the egg* is more frequent than *Jane fried the*

*lettuce* is simply that people in the world are more likely to fry eggs than

lettuce.

A further governing factor is significance: to what extent does it matter whether something is old or not? It may be presumed that the more significance something has, the more it gets talked about. Again, there are probably as many old trees as old men, but it matters little, generally speaking, whether a tree is old or young. But it makes a great deal of difference (generally) whether a man is old or young.

**12.8.2 Stereotypic combinations**

A factor leading to collocational affinity which lies on the border between the

linguistic and the non-linguistic is the existence of **stereotypic combinations,**

such as the co-occurrence of *beautiful* with *flower(s),* or *dear with friend.*

**12.8.3 Default patterns (clichés)**

A number of factors leading to collocational affinity are, of course, part of the

language.

(50) X was last night under intense pressure to resign.

Here, the meaning of *intense* would be equally well conveyed by *strong* or

*extreme,* but is significantly more likely. Similarly, *fresh allegations* (cf. *new*

*allegations), gross negligence* (cf. *great negligence),* etc.