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Semantics and the Teaching of Vocabulary

(Some reflections after the CILA 5 course at Neuchâtel, October 1971)

1. *General principles*: If we may admit that “the place for both phonetics and linguistics is *behind* the teacher”¹ (i.e. not in front of the class) and that we must distinguish between “learning a language” and “learning *about* a language”² nevertheless it must also be pointed out that *applied linguistics* – with pedagogy as one of its branches – can only exist if the science of *general descriptive linguistics* itself exists. If general linguistics has not been developed to a satisfactory level, then it is in no fit state to be applied to anything! The only trouble is that we, as teachers, cannot afford to wait till the linguistic sciences have produced an accurate account of language and language acquisition. We’re forced to compromise and make do with approximate theories and empirical methods.

Concerning traditional grammar and semantics in language teaching as opposed to the linguistic analyses being developed nowadays, I myself would agree wholeheartedly with the comment that “perhaps the only relevant question is: does it work? Of course it works. So do candles, but we nevertheless use electric light . . . we cannot hope to teach languages successfully on the scale required in the world today if we continue to display them in the candlelight of last century’s linguistics”³.

While large sections of modern linguistic theories and descriptions are still useless to us pedagogues, since, for a learner, “there is little value in being presented with a collection of features observed from the lips (or pens) of natives: he wants to be told which features to learn”⁴, I would agree that “It is not for their prescriptivism as such that the older teaching grammars stand condemned . . . it is for the fact that their prescriptions have not been based

- 1) M.A.K. Halliday, Angus McIntosh and Peter Strevens: *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*, Longman’s Linguistic Library, p. 187.
- 2) M.A.K. Halliday etc., *op.cit.*, p. 183.
- 3) M.A.K. Halliday etc., *op.cit.*, p. 155.
- 4) Randolph Quirk: *Essays on the English Language Medieval and Modern*, Longmans’ Linguistic Library, p. 109.

upon a sound foundation of description"⁵. What I should like, as an applied linguist and teacher, would be to see "emerging from descriptive data a pattern of reliable and systematic prescriptive rules"⁶. My own concluding principle would be that no amount of science can ever "replace good teaching or wholly make up for bad"⁷ but that linguistic knowledge can make the good teachers more discriminating and therefore more efficient. I say nothing of bad teachers – let us suppose that no such creatures exist in Switzerland.

2.1. *What is a Word?* We may distinguish between roughly three kinds of words (orthographic, grammatical and lexical) which are not necessarily co-extensive, as is shown in the following graph, where the "words" can be classified either as 4 grammatical items (which could also be made more numerous) or 2 lexical items (a constant figure in the examples given) and where one lexical item may be composed of one or more than one orthographic item. A line above the word shows the lexical span, while underlinings denote the grammatical span, orthographic span being obviously shown by the spacing. For a definition of lexical "open sets" and the grammatical "closed system" see M.A.K. Halliday⁸.

	Lexis item (1)	item (2)
<u>Grammar</u> item (1)	the aircraft <u>took</u> off	the captain <u>took</u> over
item (2)	<u>taking</u> off was easy	<u>taking</u> over was easy
item (3)	a neat <u>takeoff</u>	a neat <u>takeover</u>
item (4)	about to <u>take</u> off	about to <u>take</u> over

5 Randolph Quirk, *op.cit.*, p. 109.

6 Randolph Quirk, *op.cit.*, p. 112.

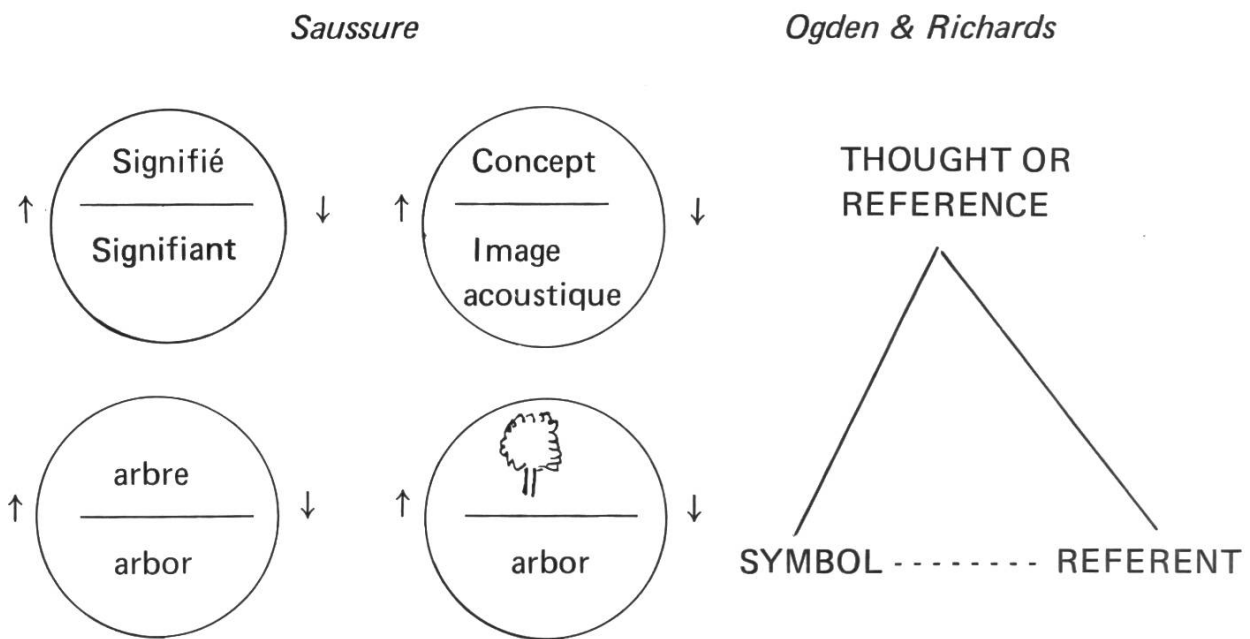
7 M.A.K. Halliday etc., *op.cit.*, Introduction, p. XII.

8 M.A.K. Halliday etc., *op.cit.*, p. 36 et passim.

Most dictionaries classify words (a) according to their spelling, (b) according to some grammatical criterion (verb, noun etc.) and (c) according to their different acceptations (or "meanings"). Depending on the type of dictionary, one or other of these criteria will prevail. In a dictionary of synonyms, where the classification is by semantically analogous groupings, criterion, (c) will be so predominant that a word like "to *look down on* people" will be classified along with "to despise, contemptuous, despicability, to scorn", etc., and not at all with "to *look at* a picture, to *look healthy* etc."

It is with such lexical words (which we will now call "items") that we shall now be concerned.

2.2. *What's in a lexical item?* According to Saussure⁹, a lexical item (*signe*) can be divided into two aspects (*signifiant* and *signifié*) and Ogden and Richards¹⁰ have provided a semiotic triangle to illustrate the tenuous nature of the link between the linguistic sign and the extra-linguistic reality (or *referent*)



Ogden and Richards explain the triangle as follows: "Between the symbol and the referent there is no relevant relation other than the indirect one, which consists in its being used by someone to stand for a referent. Symbol

9 Ferdinand de Saussure: *Cours de linguistique générale*, p. 99.

10 Ogden and Richards: *The Meaning of Meaning*, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., New York and other London publishers, p. 11.

and Referent . . . are not connected directly . . . but only indirectly round the two sides of the triangle.”

A.J. Greimas, however, formulates an objection to the above school of “sémanticiens ‘réalistes’ ”: “Un dictionnaire unilingue est un ensemble clos . . . il faut en prendre son parti . . . la reconnaissance de la clôture de l’univers sémantique implique, à son tour, le rejet des conceptions linguistiques qui définissent la signification comme la relation entre les *signes* et les *choses* et notamment le refus d’accepter la dimension supplémentaire du *référént*¹¹.”

John Lyons note: “. . . ostensive definition is only applicable to a relatively small set of words . . . there may be many items in the vocabulary of a language which do not stand in a relation of reference to anything outside the language. It may be, for example, that there is no such thing as intelligence or goodness to which the words *intelligent* or *good* refer¹².”

2.3. What is a semantic field? : If we return to Saussure, we find another essential feature of a lexical item: “Dans l’intérieur d’une même langue, tous les mots qui expriment des idées voisines se limitent réciproquement: des synonymes comme *redouter*, *craindre*, *avoir peur* n’ont de valeur propre que par leur opposition; si *redouter* n’existait pas, tout son contenu irait à ses concurrents.”

Trier says much the same thing: “Worte sind sinnlos, wenn ihre Kontrastworte aus dem gleichen Begriffsfeld dem Hörer fehlen, und sie sind unscharf und verschwommen, wenn ihre begrifflichen Nachbarn nicht mit auftauchen¹³.”

2.4. Relations between the linguistic and extra-linguistic: Stephen Ullmann comments on the theory of the semantic field proposed by the Trier school: “A semantic field does not merely reflect the ideas, values and outlook of contemporary society, but it crystallizes and perpetuates them: it hands down to the oncoming generation a ready-made analysis of experience through which the world will be viewed until the analysis becomes so palpably inadequate and out-of-date that the whole field has to be recast¹⁴.”

More tersely, Benjamin Lee Whorf remarks: “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages”, and Bacon had already written long before: “Men imagine that their minds have command of language, but it often happens that language bears rule over their minds.” Finally Coseriu

11 A.J. Greimas: *Sémantique structurale*, Larousse, p. 13.

12 John Lyons: *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, p. 425.

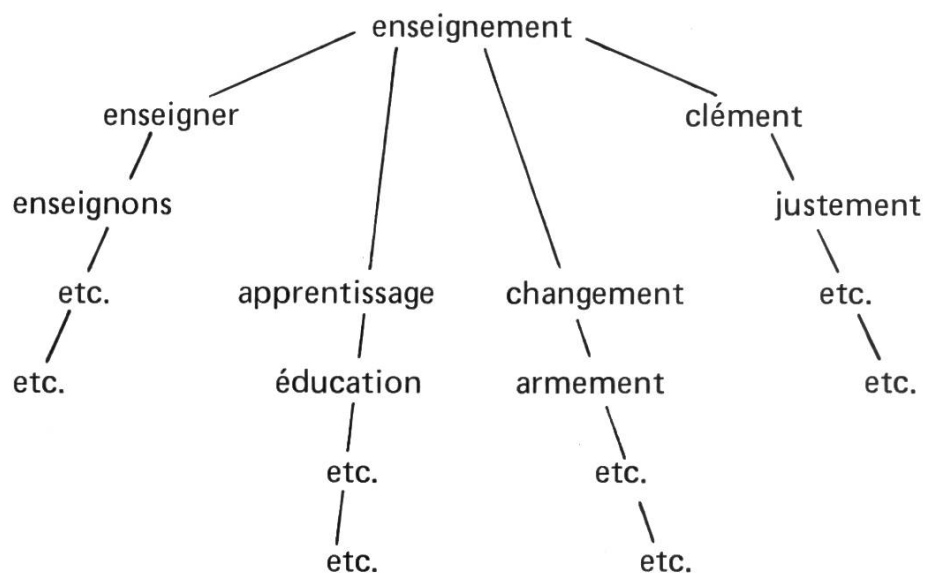
13 J. Trier: *Der deutsche Wortschatz im Sinnbezirk des Verstandes*, p. 8.

14 Stephen Ullmann: *Semantics*, Basil Blackwell, p. 250.

argues cogently that: "It is useless . . . to seek to interpret linguistic structurations from the point of view of assumed structures of reality: one must start by establishing that they are not structures *of reality* but structurations *imposed on reality* by human interpretation: structures like "large", "small", "young", "old" do not exist as such in extra-linguistic reality¹⁵."

2.5. *What's a Structuro-semantic Field?*: The method of structural semantics we propose to apply to the study of English vocabulary in this article is based on the technique worked out by Robert Galisson¹⁶. It consists in analysing a set of lexical items belonging to the same semantic field, taking into account their power to designate one or several semantic components (from which we have the term "componential analysis"). The Galisson method also takes into account the ability of the items to combine with other items to the right or left in the utterance (also called the ability to "collocate" with other items). After the long split between syntax and semantics – with semantics playing the part of the Cinderella of the linguistic sciences – the recent developments in structural semantics (or "componential and combinatory semantics", if you prefer) may be a first step towards a linking of the two. In this respect it is worth reading the article by Todorov in *Langages*¹⁷ and particularly his appreciation and criticism of Apresjan's article in the same review.

We return – eternally! – to Saussure for a graphic illustration of how one lexical item is imbricated into the total structure of the linguistic system:



15 E. Coseriu: Paper published by the Association Internationale d'Éditeurs de Linguistique Appliquée, 1967.

16 Robert Galisson: *L'apprentissage systématique du vocabulaire*, Hachette / Larousse.

17 Tzvetan Todorov: *Recherches sémantiques*, in *Langages*, mars 1966, Didier / Larousse.

The contention that the “meaning” of a lexical item is not confined to its power to refer to some extra-linguistic reality is taken a stage further in the remark made by J. Firth in 1957: “One of the “meanings” of *night* is its collocability with *dark* . . . Meaning by collocation is an abstraction at the syntagmatic level and is not directly concerned with the conceptual or idea approach to the meaning of words”¹⁸ while R. Hoberg, writing about Seiler, has this to say: “Verben wie *sprechen, reden, sagen* sind dadurch bestimmt, dass sie zu den Verben des Sagens im Deutschen gehören. Sie sind inhaltlich, aber vor allem auch syntagmatisch verschieden¹⁹.”

3.1. Vocabulary Priority in Language Learning: W.F. Mackey²⁰ provides a list of criteria for the analysis of lexical items: *Frequency, Range, Availability, Coverage, Learnability*, and sub-criteria such as Inclusion, Extension, Combination and Definition, which come under Coverage. It should be mentioned that, wishing to determine lexical priorities for English language teaching in France in order to work out a basic minimum vocabulary for the first few years of study throughout all State schools in the country, the French Ministry of Education set up a Commission du Lexique in 1969 within the framework of the Institut National de Documentation et de Recherches Pédagogiques. Using Mackey’s criteria in conjunction with the principles evolved by the team responsible for the basic vocabulary of French (*Le français fondamental*) this committee was, however, forced to the conclusion that the built-in conflicts between criteria (mentioned by Mackey himself on p. 188) could only be resolved by very empirical means – if at all. It must be said that Gougenheim, Michéa, Rivenc and Sauvageot and their collaborators had also been unable to restrict their criteria to what was strictly quantifiable²¹. It also seemed impossible to differentiate quantitatively between the learning loads involved in assimilating, for example, 1) the “morphological word”: *bath*, and 2) the different acceptations, such as a) *have a bath* (the action) b) *run a bath* (the content) c) *clean the bath* (the container or d) *a chemical bath* (laboratory apparatus). It nevertheless seemed reasonable to the Commission to regard each acceptation as involving some measure of additional learning load. Certain acceptations might even be regarded as different “words” altogether, but for the accident of having the same orthographic form, so tenuous are the semantic links between them. Compare: “a *wild* flower” and “a *wild* attempt”!

18 Quoted by J.McH. Sinclair in *English Lexical Studies* (Department of English, University of Birmingham).

19 Rudolf Hoberg: *Die Lehre vom sprachlichen Feld*, Schwann.

20 W.F. Mackey: *Language Teaching Analysis*, Longmans’, pp. 176–201.

21 Gougenheim, Michéa, Rivenc, Sauvageot: *L’Elaboration du Français Fondamental*, Didier, pp. 197–210.

The fact that it is extremely difficult to quantify the components of a lexical item does not *ipso facto* invalidate semantics as a science. Semantic analyses already allow us to see more clearly into the complexity of the choices involved in the act of language, and enable us to judge more perspicaciously the lexical content both of school text-books and of readers claiming to be written with a restricted vocabulary, but which often take little account of criteria other than frequency, and generally fail to differentiate between the frequency of the lexical item as a whole and the frequency of the individual acceptations.

3.2. Which Lexical Items to Analyse and When? Maybe all lexical items deserve to be analysed by the teacher for his own enlightenment, but I think personally that the first vocabulary-learning stage for pupils should be one in which the words are apprehended globally and dissociated both from other items in the same syntaxo-semantic field, and also from the nearest corresponding lexical item in the mother tongue, and that a contrastive analysis could be usefully integrated into a teaching technique only:

a) when the new word appears in the classroom and seems likely to perturb the division of the syntaxo-semantic field that has been made in the pupils' minds, or

b) when a certain confusion within the field has actually appeared in a pupils' performance.

4.1. How to Analyse Lexical Items? : This is how Galisson has analysed the French word *cargo*, taken from the sentence: "Je me trouve un matin dans la lumière . . . du mois d'octobre sur un *cargo* qui descend la mer d'Irlande." He contrasts it with the semantically related item *paquebot* as follows:

	moyen de transport	par mer	de fort tonnage	pour les	
				personnes	marchandises
CARGO	+	+	+	-	+
paquebot	+	+	+	+	-

← sèmes identiques →

← sèmes spécifiques →²²

²² Robert Galisson: *Analyse sémique, actualisation sémique et approche du sens en méthodologie*, U.E.R. d'Etudes Françaises pour l'Etranger, p. 10.

The immediate pedagogical advantage is not only that this technique enables one to define the new word very precisely but that it constitutes at the same time a revision of the already familiar word *paquebot*. The disadvantage, to my mind, from the point of view of the second-language learner, is that the definitions of the semantic components may involve more sophisticated vocabulary than the lexical item (or *lexeme*) which is being defined – rather as if one were to use a steam-hammer to crack a walnut! The second disadvantage is that we can only ever hope to extract from the contrastive tables the information we ourselves have put into them – with in addition, admittedly, a clearer vision of what had been only dimly perceived, which is by no means a negligible step forward.

However, in order to limit the *ad hoc* nature of the semantic components into which a lexical item is often broken down in this type of analysis, I would suggest that it might be possible for the teacher of English as a second language to work out a series of standard tests to be applied automatically to the group of related items (*parasyonyms* in Galisson's terminology). As a start, I would propose the following:

4.2.1. Nouns: Instead of beginning with the grammatical distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, I should prefer to start from the semantic distinction between what I would call, for want of a better term, *Referent Nouns* and *Verbal Nouns*. A referent noun has the property of designating a referent, whether "concrete" or "abstract", while a verbal noun is simply the noun form of a lexical item that may exist in verbal, adjectival or adverbial form also – and usually called a *nominalization*.

4.2.2. Examples of Referent Nouns:

- a) Countable concrete: *a child, student, biscuit, car, dog etc.*
- b) Uncountable concrete: *amber, ammoniac, bread, water etc.*
- c) Countable abstract: *ampere, angle, antonym, etc.*
- d) Uncountable abstract: *psychology, syntax, astronomy etc.*

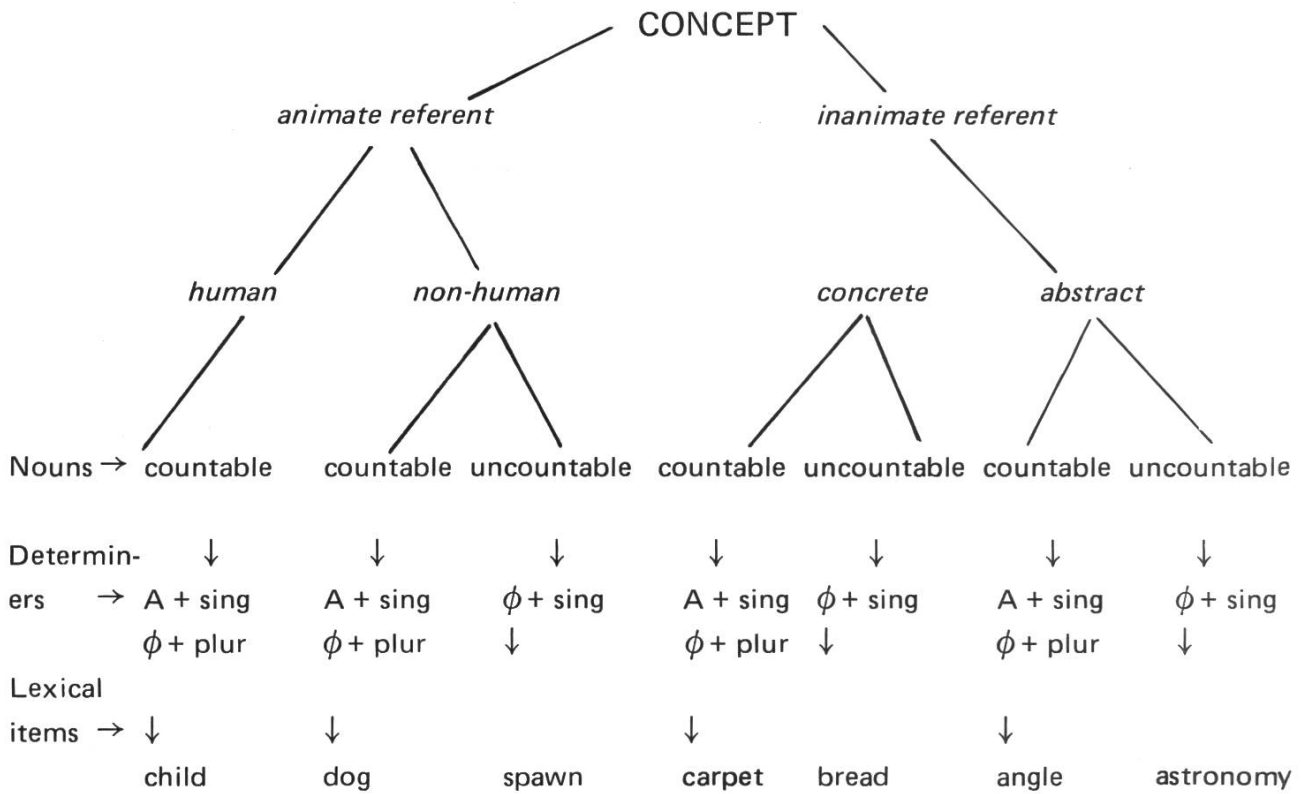
It goes without saying that certain among such nouns may belong to more than one category, being both countable and uncountable. Why this should be so, however, is another and much more difficult question to answer, and one which we must leave aside for the moment.

4.2.3. Examples of Verbal Nouns:

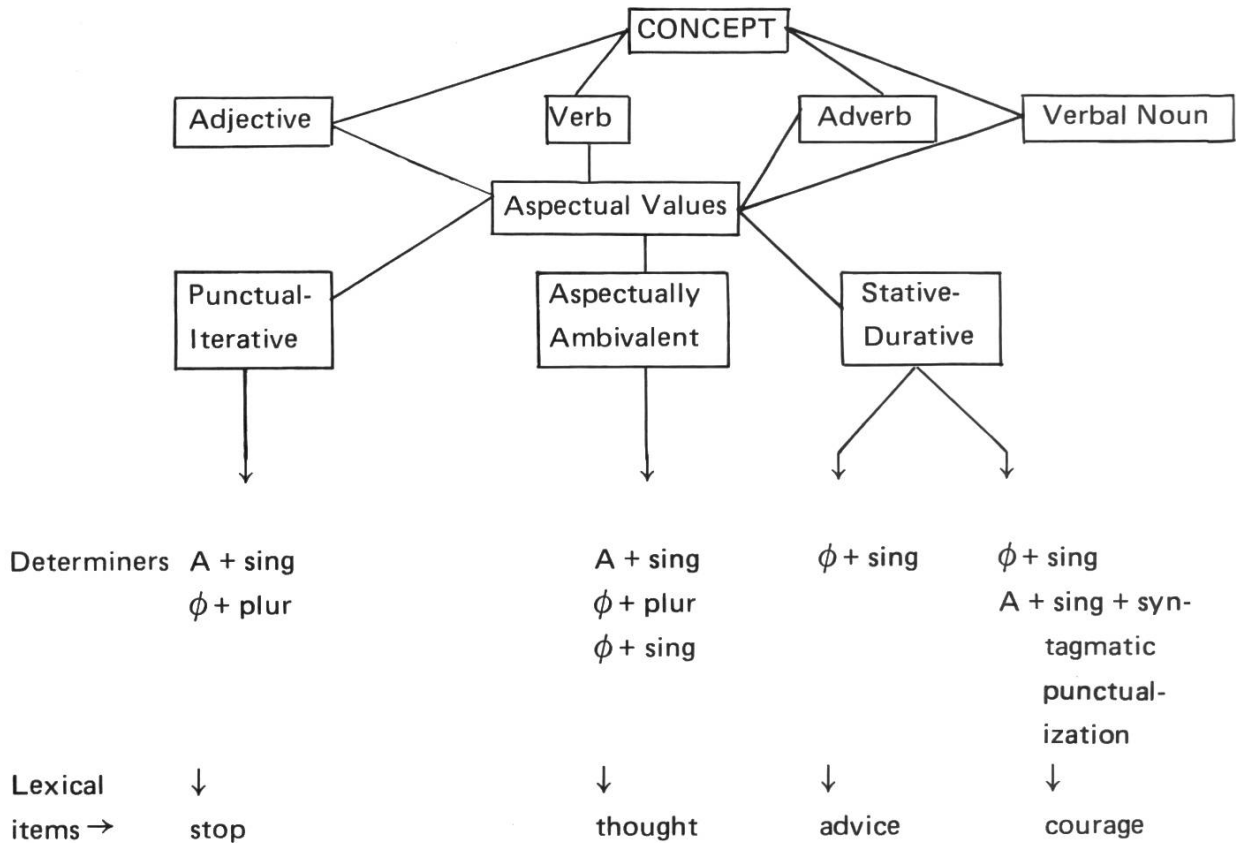
Countable: *a stop, beginning, grab etc.*

Uncountable: *beauty, goodness, courage etc.*

4.2.4. Analysis of Referent Nouns



4.2.5. Analysis of Verbal Nouns



4.2.6. To unify the terminology, it would appear preferable to replace the labels “countable” and “uncountable” by “punctual” and “non-punctual” for both referent and verbal nouns. Another reason for discarding these terms would be that, because of their extra-linguistic implications, “countable” and “uncountable” may become positive handicaps to learning English after a certain fairly elementary stage. Could it be claimed that “a sunbeam” is one only, or might one solemnly count up to seventeen sunbeams? When someone says that something requires “an effort”, can it be assumed that he is thinking of “one effort and not two”? Is “countability”, in fact, a term really descriptive of the linguistic operations involved in the production of well formed utterances, and, if it is not, how efficient can it be in triggering off the appropriate linguistic reflexes? It seems to me much more probable that the determiners mark the aspectual values of the noun, thus playing much the same role as the “simple” and “progressive” forms of the verb²³. If this hypothesis approaches linguistic reality more closely, then the mysterious human faculty of language-acquisition ought to assimilate the system more readily.

In particular the establishing of a link between verb and noun by means of the common denominator of aspectual (and, I think, modal) values, expressed through the determiners, may enable students of English to predict the syntagmatic behaviour of the “verbal noun” with a greater degree of certitude than at present. For example:

a) *Punctual-iterative*: If the verb related to the noun is predominantly punctual-iterative, the noun can be expected to follow one pattern only: (*A + sing*) (\emptyset + plural) Examples:

HALT: He came to a halt

STOP: They made several stops

BEGINNING: We have made a beginning

GRAB: He made a grab at me

b) *Aspectually ambivalent*: Since many verbs have the property of being aspectualized both punctually and non-punctually, we may expect many of the corresponding nouns to follow a double pattern: (*A + sing*) (\emptyset + plural) and also (\emptyset + sing). Examples:

23 W.B. Barrie: “What’s in a Determiner?” in *Langues Modernes* 4, 1971, 69–80.

SPIN: He put a (some) spin on the ball

THINK: A thought crossed my mind

I've been giving the matter some thought

TASTE: He has strange tastes

He has a great deal of taste

DIE: There have been many deaths on the roads

Death by drowning is a hazard of bathing

c) *Stative-durative*: Nouns associated semantically and morphologically with such verbs as *to neglect*, *to love*, *to be + adjectives* (e.g. *to be courageous*, *beautiful* etc.) can be expected to follow the ($\emptyset + singular$) pattern, and most of them can be expected, in addition, to follow the pattern ($A + sing$) when there is syntagmatic punctualization. The latter occurs when determining information is given to the *right* of the noun. Thus we have:

He showed *a* courage that was exceptional . . .

N.B. The pattern ($A + sing$) does *not*, however, imply that a plural form is possible.

The above would be considered as a compulsory syntagmatic constraint, but the punctual information to the left of the noun may or may not provoke the appearance of the nominal marker denoting punctualization. Thus we have both:

He showed \emptyset exceptional courage
and He showed *an* exceptional courage

The difference in the above two structures is probably merely the vestigial trace of the underlying deep structure operations, which might be glossed as: "He performed an action that showed he *was* courageous" or as "He *acted* courageously". It is obvious that the question of whether the courage could be attributed to character (i.e. static) or is simply a more or less fortuitous occurrence (i.e. punctual) is left unanswered. It may be that no question exists, but that, in the speaker's mind, at one point in the linguistic operations that precede the production of a well-formed surface structure, either the action itself or the character of the performer is uppermost.

The non-punctual marker ($\emptyset + singular$) would be much more normal when the syntagmatic concomitants are stative, as in: *He was a man of \emptyset exceptional courage*.

4.3. *Verbs*: The verb may be categorized in several ways:

1) according to the collocates both to the right and to the left in the surface string i.e. the nouns acting as subject or object, other verbal forms, or else linking words such as prepositions;

2) according to whether the verb is transitive (with or without object-deletion) or intransitive, or both transitive and intransitive.

One may contrast the syntagmatic behaviour of the verbs *to afford* and *to eat*:

- a) I can't *afford a holiday* this year
- b) * I'm not going on holiday this year because I can't *afford*
- a) I *eat fish* twice a day
- b) I *eat* twice a day.

One can also contrast *to afford* and *to allow*:

- a) I can't *afford to go* on holiday this year
- b) * I can't *afford him to go* on holiday this year
- a) * The situation doesn't *allow to go* on holiday this year
- b) The situation doesn't *allow me to go* on holiday this year;

3) according to whether it can be followed by an infinitive or by a gerundive, or both (with or without a syntagmatic or semantic constraint).

We find, for example:

- a) I *advise taking* a rest
- b) I *advise you to take* a rest
- a) I *like travelling* by day when the countryside is worth seeing
- b) I *like to travel* by night when the countryside isn't worth seeing;

4) according to whether it can be aspectualized punctually or non-punctually, or both – and if punctually, whether it is purely iterative e.g. *dazzle, clatter* etc.

Incidentally, it may be pointed out that nouns corresponding to such iterative verbs may be preceded by the punctual determiner "A", but rarely have plurals – one of the functions of the plural being to denote iterative values when these are *not* implicit in the singular form of the noun.

4.4. Adjectives: The adjective may be classified according to:

- a) whether it can be used as an epithet or only attributively;
- b) whether it can collocate (or co-occur) with a particular type of noun (verbal, referent, abstract etc.);
- c) whether its semantic content is describable as "cognitive" (i.e. purporting to convey objective information) or/and "appreciative" (i.e. conveying the speaker's appreciation of the facts).

5.1. Structuro-semantic analyses: Here are some analyses of contrasted lexical items and some suggestions for exercises in class:

5.2.1. Now – Presently – Just now

		localisation in time		
		↓	———↓	↓———
now	+	—	—	
presently	—	+	—	
just now	—	—	+	

N.B. The arrows indicate the orientation in time (vertical = situated within the present; pointing towards the right = directed towards the future; pointing towards the left = directed towards the past). A plus-sign (+) = affirmation; a minus-sign (—) = negation.

5.2.2. Exercise: The common semantic factor being localization in time, the exercise will concentrate on tense usage:

<i>Teacher:</i>	I'm working now	<i>Class:</i>	I'm working now
	They're eating . . .		They're eating now
	Presently		They'll be eating presently
	I'll be seeing him . . .		I'll be seeing him presently
	Just now		I saw him just now etc. etc.

Another way of getting a class to memorize the words might consist in having the words arranged in columns. The teacher points to one column, and the class gives the appropriate answer from the other column:

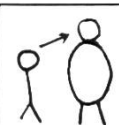
I'm working	
They're eating	now
I'll be seeing him	presently
I saw him	just now
They'll be seeing him etc.	

Alternatively, the verbs may be given in infinitive form:

I	work	now
you	eat	presently
he	see him	just now
we		
they	etc.	

This would provide a more testing exercise, the pupils having to provide all the grammatical markers to make up a well-formed utterance.

5.3.1. *Big – Great – Large*

	+ referent nouns		+ verbal nouns		inherent semantic value	
	concrete	abstract	punctual	non-punctual	appreciative	cognitive
						
big	+	+	+	-	+	+
large	+	+	-	-	-	+
great	+	+	+	+	+	-

For the common semantic axis, we may represent the concept by match-stick figures in order to avoid making the explanation of the individual semantic components more sophisticated than the words we were attempting to explain. It is probable that children who do not know how to distinguish *big*, *large* and *great* would be even more at a loss to understand the headings of the other columns given above – referent nouns, inherent semantic values:

appreciative and cognitive. On the other hand, it seems to me that it might be worth the effort of explaining such criteria if they are going to enable us to explain not simply *big*, *large* and *great* (which would obviously be a waste of energy) but also very many other semantic groups. However, that's up to each one of us to decide. It depends so much on the pupils one has, one's own temperament etc.

An interesting feature emerging from the above table is that the circled elements make *large* the privileged word to describe the concrete measurable aspects of the following noun, since it alone of the three adjectives contains cognitive values to the exclusion of appreciative values. We can see that *big* is the privileged adjective to give appreciative and cognitive information *simultaneously*, so that: "What a big boy you are now" would suggest both physical size and appreciation of the fact. Both *big* and *great* would have the privileged role of introducing nouns that cannot readily be qualified in a cognitive way – most verbal nouns, for instance, and many abstract referent nouns – and *great* would be the only adjective able to qualify the non-punctual nouns of such categories.

5.3.2. You can try the following sentences for fun with your classes:

- 1) He built a *big* / *large* / *great* / wall round his house
- 2) He takes a *big* / *large* / *great* size in boots
- 3) This shop specializes in dresses for the bigger / *larger* / greater woman
- 4) There was a *big* / *large* / *great* celebration (danger, laugh)
- 5) He showed big / *large* / *great* grief (courage).

I would suggest that the italicized adjectives are possible, and the others either less probable or quite unacceptable. In sentence 2, for example, I should prefer *large*, would accept *big* and reject *great* (the noun *size* requiring the adjective to have a cognitive value).

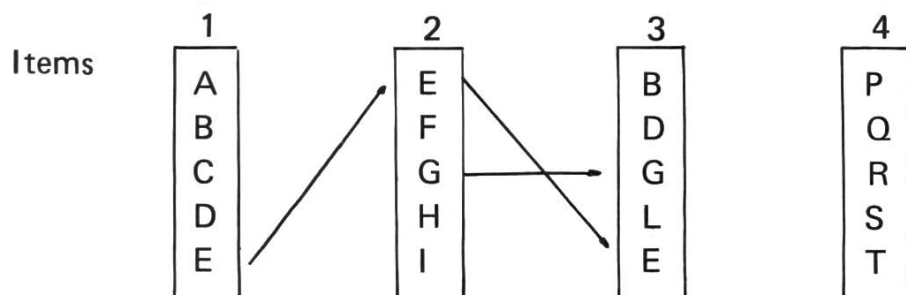
5.4. In this connection, we may quote Robert Galisson, writing about "actualisation sémique" i.e. the fact that a particular acceptance (or acceptations) will appear when a word is inserted in a given context, while certain other semantic components are pushed into the background.

"Tout se passe comme si le sème constituait une sorte de clavier (chaque touche représentant un sème) sur lequel le contexte joue. De la même manière que le pianiste n'appuie pas sur toutes les touches en même temps, le contexte actualise certains sèmes et neutralise les autres, en fonction du message qu'il est chargé de transmettre²⁴."

24 Robert Galisson: *Analyse sémique etc., op.cit.*, p. 15.

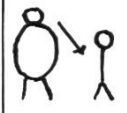
Whether two or more words can collocate (i.e. appear together in the same surface string) will depend on whether their semantic components are compatible. If, for instance, the adjective *large* is not compatible with verbal nouns, then the sentence: * *It's a large pity* will not be acceptable, as indeed it is not.

If we characterize the semantic components by letters, A, B, C etc., we can illustrate diagrammatically such compatibilities and incompatibilities:



For the sake of simplicity we have constructed the diagram in such a way that there is only one compatible component between lexical items 1 and 2, two compatible components between items 2 and 3, and none at all between item 4 and all the others. But it would be quite possible to imagine many more than two common compatible components, which may also be arranged in a certain hierarchy, so that the resulting utterance becomes extremely rich in suggestive overtones – it is indeed one of the essential characteristics of a style like that of T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas and many others. On a more everyday plane, we might mention the relatively simple polysemy of a sentence like: *He has built a great wall round his house* (i.e. a) it is materially speaking not small *and* b) its size is impressive) and the ambiguity of a sentence like: *There was a great painting hanging in the hall* (i.e. (a) of impressive dimensions, *or* (b) of exceptional quality).

5.5. Little – small – slight

		+ referent nouns		+ verbal nouns		inherent semantic values	
		concrete	abstract	non-punctual	punctual	appreciative	cognitive
little	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
small	+	+	+	+	+	–	+
slight	+	–	+	+	+	+	–

From the above table we can see that the parallelism between *big, large, great* and *little, small, slight* is not perfect. You can't have a *slight wall* round your garden! Compare also *small* and *large*.

5.6.1. Allow – enable – permit

	≠ prevent	semantic values		transitive with object	
		moral	circumstantial	deletable	non-deletable
allow	+	+	+	–	+
enable	+	–	+	–	+
permit	+	+	+	–	+

The circled elements make *enable* a privileged verb for the description of a situation where something is made possible by circumstances and not by human good will. I arrived at the criteria 'moral' and 'circumstantial' by first trying out the oppositions "animate" versus "inanimate" and then refining on "animate – human – moral".

The sentence: *My father enabled me to get a good education*, would lead us to suppose some deep structure that might be glossed as: "My father arranged circumstances in such a way that I was able to get a good education." I don't know how to distinguish between *allow* and *permit*. I can only guess that *permit* has survived because it is related to the only nouns that convey the semantic content of *allow* i.e. *permit, permission*. The noun related morphologically to *allow* would be *allowance*, which leads us into a quite different semantic field, including *to tolerate*.

5.6.2. To practise these verbs one might try the following:

Stimuli from the teacher

My father	allows me	to stay out after midnight
His parents		
		to smoke cigars
Her mother		
	permit	
Their income		
		to have a maid
	enable	
		to go to Majorca for a week-end
Package tours		
		to fly to the USA cheaply
Giant jets		


Given the semantic and syntactic constraints, the complete sentences composed by teacher stimulus *and* class response would be as follows (the teacher's stimuli being in italics):

My father allows me to stay out after midnight
His parents allow him to stay out after midnight
 His parents allow him *to smoke cigars*
Her mother allows her to smoke cigars
 Her mother *permits* her to smoke cigars
Their income permits them to smoke cigars

Their income permits them *to have a maid*
 Their income *enables* them to have a maid
 Their income enables them *to go to Majorca for a week-end*
Package tours enable them to go to Majorca for a week-end
 Package tours enable them *to fly to the USA cheaply*
Giant jets enable them to fly to the USA cheaply

It would be possible to go on, replacing *enable* by *allow* or *permit* in order to accustom the class to the obligatory presence of an object, if this characteristic introduced an element of interference with the native language, e.g. French: *Les grands avions à réaction permettent de . . .*

5.7. Shadow – shade

		concept			aspectual values	
		shape	darkness	coolness	punctual	non-punctual
shadow	+	+	+	-	+	+
shade	+	-	+	+	+	+

Such an analysis would enable us to produce acceptable sentences such as:

- a) He rested from the heat in the *shade* of the tree
- b) He hid in the *shadow* of the tree
- c) He recognized it was a poplar from the *shadow*

On the other hand, it must be admitted that such a table would not necessarily supply us with the information that would lead us to reject: *He hid in the shadow* in favour of: *He hid in the shadows*. And, in order to complete the lexical description of the item *shade*, we should also have to work out another table, contrasting it with *colour*, *tint* etc.

5.8. Let us look at another group of nouns presenting rather different characteristics:

Dream – dreaming – dreaminess

	≠ wide awake	aspectual values		aspectual markers
		punctual	non-punctual	Det. "A" + sing + syntagmatic punctualization
dream	+	+	–	+
dreaming	+	–	+	–
dreaminess	+	–	+	+

The distinction to be made between the three nouns is predominantly a grammatical one – the aspectual values of the noun – though we may wonder whether this kind of grammatical meaning is not, in fact, very close to semantic meaning.

It may be said in passing that the above pattern is typical of nouns having counterparts in verbal or adjectival forms. When more than one noun form exists, it is frequent for these nouns to divide out the aspectual values, so that a particular aspect is denoted not only by the presence of a certain determiner, but also by the particular morphology of the noun itself.

6. Conclusion

I fully realize that the criteria I have used are open to a great many well-founded criticisms. How can one classify, for instance, the lexical item "egg" – animate or inanimate? – and how can one distinguish clearly between grammatical, collocational and semantic meaning? The whole terminology probably needs to be redefined and uniformized – including such terms as "singular" and "plural" – but until our betters have thought out more powerful and accurately descriptive criteria, it may possibly still serve a useful pedagogical purpose. This article is a modest attempt to apply to the classroom study of English not only the method evolved by Galisson

for the study of French, but even more particularly the principle set out by Antoine Culioli in 1970:

“Tout changement syntaxique entraîne un changement sémantique . . . Dire qu’une phrase et sa transformée sont équivalentes ne change rien au problème: tout réside dans la force de l’équivalence . . . Tout vaudra mieux que la séparation *essentielle* de syntaxe et de sémantique . . . on posera le caractère licite d’une sémantique formelle²⁵.”

A question to end with. Supposing someone were to make the comment: “That’s a lot of car for \$ 1000! ” would the utterance evoke the same image as: “That’s a big car for \$ 1000! ”? If not, in what way is the linguistic image different?

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25 Antoine Culioli: “ La formalisation en linguistique” in *Documents de Linguistique Quantitative 7*, Dunod.