One man's norm is another's metaphor

Review article on: Patrick Hanks, *Lexical Analysis: Norms and Exploitations.*
Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013; pp. xv + 462.

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Abstract

Patrick Hanks sees linguistic approaches to word meaning as divided between two unattractive extremes. Generative theories, such as were pioneered by Katz and Fodor (1963) and pursued recently e.g. by Wierzbicka (1996), attempt to capture meanings with an apparatus of quasi-mathematical rules and universal semantic primitives which is unequal to reflecting the messy realities revealed by empirical corpus studies. On the other hand, the doctrine of linguistic creativity advanced by Sampson (1980, 2001) is unduly defeatist in denying the possibility of scientific analysis. Hanks argues that theoretical linguistics and practical lexicography should both embrace an intermediate position which distinguishes between high-frequency "norms" of usage and rare "exploitations". This allows linguists and lexicographers to produce scientific lexical description while nevertheless acknowledging messy variability.

Keywords

Dictionaries and corpora

Patrick Hanks is a lexicographer. For much of his career he was on the staff of dictionary publishers (mainly Collins and Oxford University Press – until 2000 he was Chief Editor of Current English Dictionaries for OUP), before moving more recently into university teaching and research. His book offers an account of natural language, and particularly of the nature of word meanings, which is sharply at odds with influential trends in linguistic theory, and is heavily coloured by the practical experience of taking responsibility for compiling dictionary entries using the hard evidence found in large corpora. (Both at Collins and at Oxford, lexicography in recent decades has made extensive use of corpus data.)

Perhaps the first remarkable thing about Hanks's book is that it is published by the MIT Press, which has for many years been the very *fons et origo* of linguistic theorizing in the aprioristic, intuition-based, unempirical generative style. To this, Hanks is outspokenly opposed. He writes on his p. 358:

> Relying on introspection as a source of data and appealing to intuitions for judgments about idiomaticity is common practice to this day among

theoretical linguists and indeed has been vigorously defended by some. It is even used by some corpus linguists, who should know better. ... it is indefensible, no matter how sound the theory and how well-tuned the linguist's intuitions may be.

That's most previous MIT linguistics authors told, then. Hanks even goes to the lengths, when he quotes an invented example in order to illustrate a point (as is occasionally unavoidable), of printing it in italics to ensure that no reader mistakes it for a genuine example of observed naturalistic usage.

Hanks knows, of course, that all science makes use of intuition, and that theories will never emerge mechanically from any amount of empirical observations. His position on this is subtler than that of some linguists who have discussed methodological issues:

> There is a huge difference between consulting one's intuitions to *explain* data and consulting one's intuitions to *invent* data. Every scientist engages in introspection to explain data. No reputable scientist (outside linguistics) invents data in order to explain it. It used to be thought that linguistics is special – that an exception could be made in the case of linguistics – but comparing the examples invented by linguists with the actual usage found in corpora shows that this is not justifiable. (p. 20)

A belief that linguistics is special is not just something which "used" to obtain: many theoretical linguists still hold it, and will no doubt object strongly to Hanks's view. On the other hand, representatives of any other scientific enterprise would see his remark as a banal truism. Linguistics might have been "special" because, unlike the topics studied by many sciences, it deals with an aspect of our own intellectual behaviour, which could have meant that we have privileged, veridical introspective awareness of the properties of our language (whereas no-one would imagine that a marine biologist, say, could possibly have veridical intuitions about the properties of sea creatures). But the idea that our intuitions about our own speech-patterns are veridical has been tested to destruction. It turns out that they are often quite wrong.

(It must be said, though, that Hanks does not always heed his own lessons. Quite often he makes pronouncements about English that appear to be based on nothing more than his own intuitions, and these are as fallible as anyone else's. On p. 20, for instance, he asserts that the sentence *Prince Charles is now a husband*, found by John Sinclair in an English Language Teaching textbook, is unnatural because "English requires that you say *whose* husband Prince Charles is or *what* sort of husband he is". Does it? My own personal website has for years past told the world that *I am a husband, father, and grandfather.* Possibly that makes me an incompetent user of English, but I should like to see hard evidence for that. Linguists ought perhaps to do as Hanks says, not necessarily as he does.)

The Theory of Norms and Exploitations

Because of their "indefensible" reliance on introspection as a data source, Hanks sees the generative school of linguistics as holding a grossly misleading model of natural language, in which all aspects of language structure, including the senses of

lexical items, are formalizable in terms of clearcut rules, features drawn from a universal set of semantic primitives, or the like. Perhaps not many linguists today would agree in detail with the theory of word senses promulgated by Jerrold Katz and Jerry Fodor (1963), but the general spirit of their approach, with its exact, quasi-mathematical formal apparatus, is still very much alive. Indeed, writers such as Anna Wierzbicka (e.g. 1996), discussed at length by Hanks, have been pressing this style of theorizing further than Katz and Fodor in what Hanks sees as the wrong direction. For Hanks, any analysis in this tradition is sure seriously to misrepresent the essential messiness (my word) of real-life usage, which may not have been salient for linguists in the days before widespread access to large electronic corpora, but today is impossible to overlook (provided one is willing to examine the empirical data).

On this issue I believe plenty of 21st-century linguists would agree with Hanks, though some diehard generativists will continue to resist. Indeed, the years when the dominant school of linguistics was treating the rule-governedness of lexical meaning as axiomatic overlapped with the period when the opposite point of view was a central axiom for philosophers, thanks to the influence not just of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), whom Hanks discusses, but, earlier, of Morton White (1950) and Willard Quine (1951), whom he does not mention. The generative approach to word meaning survived as long as it did only because few linguists had any familiarity with what was going on in philosophy departments (and when a few of them did notice, their responses were too naïve to take seriously – cf. Sampson 1980: 67–74). Philosophy has never resiled from that scepticism about the analytic/synthetic distinction, though by now this is no longer a central issue because philosophers have moved on to focus on topics very different from their "ordinary language" preoccupations of the 1950s and 1960s.

However, Hanks is not simply saying that the generative approach to word meaning is wrong and the opposite point of view is correct. His position is more interesting than that. He believes that the truth lies between two extremes. One extreme, the generative approach, is represented by writers such as Katz and Fodor. The opposite, "creative" point of view is represented by the present reviewer. According to Hanks (p. 3, citing Sampson 2001: chap. 11):

> Sampson is right [to object to the generative approach] in that strict, quasi-mathematical symbolization of meaning is pointless, but wrong to stop there. The statistical methods that Sampson advocates for other kinds of linguistic analysis must be extended to the semantics of human languages. This is not as futile as chasing a rainbow ... Word meaning is dynamic, but that does not mean that it cannot be measured.

As a counter to both these misguided extremes, Hanks promulgates a Theory of Norms and Exploitations, often represented by an acronym, "TNE". The main purpose of his book is to urge that words do have clearcut and relatively fixed senses, which emerge fairly unmistakably when KWIC concordancing is applied to large corpora, but that speakers also have a propensity to "exploit" a word's "normal" sense by extending or modifying it in diverse directions. (By exploitations, Hanks means much the same as what some would call figurative or metaphorical usage.) Not only academic linguists, but practical dictionary-

compilers also, get into difficulties by failing to make the distinction between learned norms and creative exploitations (thus dictionaries often struggle to list, as separate word-senses, long series of more or less one-off exploitations that some language user has produced). But the distinction is there to be recognized, and clarity about word meaning depends on recognizing it. Dictionaries ought to describe the norms but should not attempt to list possible exploitations.

The creativity of language usage

Let me say, in the first place, that I accept it as quite fair of Hanks to identify me with the point of view which he aims to counter on one flank (the one opposite to the generative flank), and to associate that point of view with the concept of "creativity". Indeed, in recent writing I have argued for a larger role for creativity in language behaviour than I did in the work cited by Hanks. For much of my career I believed, with the philosophers mentioned above, that words do not have fixed, well-defined senses, and that speakers commonly modify the senses of the words they use in unpredictable ways; but I broadly accepted the generative approach in the domain of syntax – I supposed that acquiring a natural language must mean inferring some kind of rules specifying what counts as a well-formed string of words, though it was worrying that linguistics has had so little success in identifying adequate syntactic rules for any language. In more recent writing, though (particularly Sampson 2007, Sampson and Babarczy 2013), I have argued that "rule-governedness" is almost as inapplicable to natural-language syntax as to natural-language semantics.

I have illustrated what I now take to be the truth of the matter by an analogy with tracks in an area of savannah occupied by a pre-modern society, lacking sophisticated legal concepts of private property and rights of way. There would be some broad, well-beaten roads – those correspond to English sentences using well-worn structures such as Subject–Transitive Verb–Object. Other routes would be more lightly travelled, down to barely-discernible disturbances of the grass, corresponding to the more unusual sequences of words which often crop up in work with corpora though they are rarely discussed in generative writing based on invented examples. Crucially, there would be no concept of an "ill-formed" or "forbidden" route. In the society that I imagine, if one asked "May I walk from point *A* to point *B*?" in a case where no-one seems to have gone just that way before, the expected answer would be along the lines "Well, if you want to go that way, feel free: no-one has found it useful to do so before, but there is nothing to stop you".

Analogously, in a natural language, while it is clear that there are some sentence patterns (such as the transitive pattern cited above) which are central to the grammar of the language, I no longer believe that it is meaningful to describe strings of words as "ungrammatical" or "ill-formed". They may be unusual, but if speakers see it as useful to do so they are free to use them in the hope that hearers will grasp what they mean by them. Speakers often do this, successfully, which is why adequate generative grammars are never achieved. A grammatical description of a language will identify the widest roads and some of the lesser tracks, but where the cut-off comes between paths established enough to be included in the description, and little-travelled routes which are ignored, will be a purely arbitrary matter determined by issues such as the time and resources available to the

grammarian or his publisher. This, I believe, is a fair characterization of what traditional, "pedagogic" grammars of English did, and it is the most that can be done. To try to go further and define "all and only" the valid sentences of a natural language really is chasing a rainbow.

If this is true for natural-language syntax, to my mind it is more clearly true, and less controversial, for Hanks's domain of natural-language word meaning.

Two concepts of creativity

Before relating these ideas to Hanks's Theory of Norms and Exploitations, I need to make some preliminary remarks on the concept of "creativity", because that concept has been grievously distorted by generative linguists, in a way that has made intelligent discussion of crucial features of natural language very difficult. Since his earliest writings (e.g. [1965] 1971: 153–4; 1966: 11) Noam Chomsky has described language use as commonly "creative" on the ground that utterances are not drawn from a finitely-long memorized list of potential sentences, but rather from a set generated by rules which permit an infinitely numerous (though well-defined) range of possibilities, so that a particular instance will very likely never have been used before by anyone.

This is very different indeed from what the term "creative" normally means, for instance in connexion with the arts. To see that, consider that in Chomsky's terms to execute a complicated addition or multiplication would be a "creative" act. It may well be that no-one in history has ever before summed 37190265 and 52463992 to give 89654257. But, in the days when people were employed to do such work manually, they were certainly not perceived as "creative" workers. The usual sense of "creative", rather, implies that a product will commonly fall outside any class that could have been predicted on the basis of previous instances of the activity in question, and yet the innovation, once it exists, is recognized as in some way a valid or worthwhile example of that activity. A creative painter, for instance, is one who produces canvases that deviate in some way from the stylistic norms established by earlier artists, and yet are seen by his audience as worthwhile paintings rather than mere random daubs. A painter who confines himself to producing new instances of well-defined genres, without stretching the established norms in any direction, may be seen as technically accomplished (and his pictures may be highly saleable), but one would not normally apply the term "creative" to his work.

As a statement of how the term "creative" has traditionally been used, this is uncontroversial. (I made these points at length as long ago as Sampson (1979: 101–7), in an analysis that was received warmly by philosophers though it was rejected out of hand by linguists, who in those days were in such triumphalist mood that they seemed deaf to any questioning of the assumptions of the dominant generative ideology.) The trouble with generativists' commandeering of the term for a very different, weaker sense is that, if one accepts their redefinition, the English language is left with no obvious word to mean "genuinely creative, creative in the traditional sense". I am arguing that natural-language usage, both with respect to word meanings and with respect to grammar, is commonly creative in the traditional sense, not merely in Chomsky's impoverished sense. If one is concerned to arrive at truth, rather than merely to win arguments for one's own side right or

wrong (which is not respectable academic behaviour), hijacking of key terms is not a helpful move.

Bimodality of usage

Since Hanks explicitly identifies me as one of the linguists he has in his sights, the reader will not think me unduly disputatious if I use this paper to defend my corner against him. But that should not be taken to imply that I see this as a bad or valueless book. On the contrary, I believe anyone seriously interested in word meaning will learn a great deal from Hanks's volume, and will be led to think about a host of issues which deserve to be thought about, but are often overlooked. Ultimately, I am sceptical about the highest-level generalizations formulated by Hanks, but I have certainly gained by accompanying him on the journey through which he aims to lead his readers towards those generalizations.

If Hanks's distinction between norms and exploitations meant simply that much of the time speakers use a given word in ways that have abundant precedents, but sometimes their usage is less predictable, then probably few would want to disagree but he might not have said very much. Clearly, a capital-letter Theory implies something more challenging. And Hanks is explicit about the fact that he sees his Theory of Norms and Exploitations as a full-blown scientific theory of language (or at least of important aspects of language), a rival alternative to generative theory, Halliday's "systemic linguistics", Langacker's "cognitive linguistics", and others of the kind. "TNE … would not be a runner at all if I … did not believe that it could be entered in the Language Theory Stakes as a potential winner" (p. 426).

The crucial point which seems to make TNE a substantial theory, rather than a mere truism about some usage instances being more predictable than others, is Hanks's contention that the norm/exploitation contrast is sharp rather than a continuous gradient. He says (p. 18):

> one finding of corpus linguistics is that the regularities of language in use are much more regular than predicted by speculative linguistic theories that talk about "creativity", while some of the irregularities are much more irregular than anything predicted by those same theories.

Instead of a range of grassland tracks of all degrees of width and distinctiveness, Hanks is saying, as it were, that in reality we observe something much more like the route pattern in a modern society: on the one hand a network of well-defined metalled roads, and on the other hand all kinds of minor ad-hoc pathways which a cartographer (or in the linguistic case a dictionary-maker) can and should ignore. Exploitations are rare, and "Rare exploitations should not be presented as regular elements of the lexicon" (p. 194).

> If language in use were less patterned – that is, if it were as "creative" as some theoretical linguists have predicted, it would not be possible to tease out prototypical patterns of meaning and use from a concordance (p. 81).

> The creative potential of language is undeniable, but the concordances to a corpus remind us forcibly that in most of our utterances we are creatures of

habit, immensely predictable, rehearsing the same old platitudes and the same old clichés in almost everything we say (p. 141).

It seems, then, that much hangs on the question whether Hanks provides convincing evidence for this bimodal model of usage – frequently repeated "normal" uses, occasional one-off or nearly one-off abnormal "exploitations", and little or nothing in between. In the case of syntax, I have offered quantitative evidence against that model (Sampson 2007: 7–10, Sampson and Babarczy 2013: sec. 4.3), showing that construction frequencies range quite smoothly from very common to extremely rare and every possibility in between, with no discontinuity that might be equated with a distinction between "competent behaviour" and "performance errors" or the like. My surmise is that a similar continuous model applies in the case of word meanings, though I have not myself studied that issue quantitatively. Has Hanks assembled evidence that tends to refute my surmise?

Well, one would have to say that he has not, in this book, given us quantitative evidence. Hanks writes on the basis of extensive experience of using concordances for lexicography, and he shows us a few examples of KWIC concordances for interesting words (e.g. sixty-odd concordance lines for *condescending*, pp. 164–5, illustrating a contrast between an earlier positive sense and the familiar present-day pejorative sense of this word). But we get no numerical analysis that might demonstrate that the bimodal model is more than an impressionistic response by Hanks to his data (and, if it were only that, the bimodality could have originated in the prior assumptions Hanks brought to his material, rather than in the data themselves).

Indeed, there are even passages where Hanks calls the division between norms and exploitations "arbitrar[y]" (p. 173) and says that "A problem facing the analyst of norms and exploitations is that there is not a sharp dividing line between the two phenomena. They represent opposite ends of a cline" (p. 249). If this were Hanks's position throughout the book, then I am not clear how much of a theory he would be left with; but I take these to be odd deviations from the position he maintains elsewhere.

How are norms and exploitations distinguished?

Another way of approaching the issue is to look at how Hanks decides that some particular usage which a reader might take as debatable in terms of norm/exploitation status is in fact one or the other. The most definite example of this that I found occurs in the course of a critique of work by Beth Levin, whom Hanks sees as a linguist who goes wrong about word sense through treating introspections as reliable data. On p. 193 Hanks quotes two of Levin's examples (italicized because invented):

(1)   *The horse jumped over the fence.*
(2)   *Sylvia jumped her horse over the fence.*

Hanks calls (1) an "inchoative" and (2) a causative use of *jump.* (Hanks appears to use "inchoative" simply as a synonym for intransitive – so far as I can see, his use of this word as a grammatical category has nothing to do with its etymological sense

of inceptive and rudimentary.) But then Hanks asks us to consider the following corpus example:

(3)   My sister jumped me and started pounding my head.

Hanks writes:

> The default meaning [of (3)] is that my sister attacked me or leaped on me. It is unfortunate that some dictionaries imply that it might also mean that she caused me to jump. It would be really unusual for it to have this meaning ... Only if I am a horse would it be normal [for (3)] to activate a causative meaning of induced action.
>   In TNE, an inchoative meaning for *jump* is classed as abnormal – that is, an exploitation. The point is worth belaboring [*sic*, for "labouring"] because not only Levin's book but also other texts, including dictionaries aimed at native speakers, record innumerable senses and alternatives such as this, which are theoretically possible (and may even have been attested once or twice) but abnormal.

In the first line of the second quoted paragraph, Hanks surely intended to say that it is the *causative* (not the "inchoative") sense of *jump* which is an exploitation. That is presumably just a slip. But more importantly, although I am sure that Hanks is correct to say that *jump* is used much more often intransitively than causatively, I do not follow what entitles him to call one of these uses an "exploitation", rather than seeing them as alternative norms differing in frequency. Indeed, as we see, he says that the causative use *is* normal if the object is a horse. The fact that it would be very unusual to find *jump* used in a causative sense when object as well as subject is human is easily explained. It is not physically possible for one human being to ride on another's back and for the latter to jump: the weight precludes it. (Perhaps a little child could ride on an adult's shoulders and the adult could jump at an agreed signal; but in connexion with a game like that, (3), said by a big brother about his tiny sister, would surely be normal enough?)

We do not need a doctrine of norms versus exploitations, or any other linguistic apparatus, to explain why assertions of manifest impossibilities are rarely expressed. I have little doubt that a sentence pattern [*Subject*] *kicked a cloud* has a very low frequency, but that is not because *kick* is being used in a sense that is an "exploitation". It is because creatures with feet do not commonly find themselves standing next to clouds, and even if one should do so, a cloud would not be solid enough to be kickable. I should have thought it was quite appropriate for a dictionary to list both uses of *jump*, and while for practical purposes it might be helpful to point out that the causative sense is associated with horses (not every dictionary user will be familiar with this style of equestrianism), in principle it will be redundant to do that, because it is self-evident that riders will normally be said to make only those steeds jump which are capable of jumping under the weight of a rider.

I sympathize with the problem that dictionaries which attempt to be comprehensive find themselves recording more and more senses whose frequencies in use are lower and lower, but that is because comprehensiveness in this domain is

an unattainable goal. The narrower the grassland tracks you try to record, the more you will find, and there will be no end to that process.

Different timescales

One might think that the difference between Hanks's position and mine is chiefly a matter of timescale. Cartographers see the outlines of the world's land-masses as fixed, mappable in detail with precise latitude and longitude figures and names for each little promontory or bay. Contrast that with the clumps of froth or bubbles that form on the surface of a boiling liquid; at any moment they have particular shapes which could be recorded in a photograph, but it would be absurd to name and record the positions of individual "capes" or "bays", because they vanish as fast as they appear in the constant roiling. Yet the theory of continental drift implies that, if there were some creature for which a million years was as brief an interval as a second is for us, to that creature the geography of Earth would be an ever-changing scene like the boiling saucepan. Analogously, one might think that the difference between Hanks's belief in identifiable norms and my belief in the creativity of usage is not a real disagreement about the nature of language, but only a difference of perspective on the passage of time, with a year or a decade perceived as a long interval, within which little changes, by Hanks, and as one of a series of short intervals, between which many things change, by me.

To this I would respond in the first place that even if there is some truth in it, I do believe that Hanks underestimates the speed at which significant language changes emerge. On p. 32 he makes specific suggestions about the rate at which new words belonging to various parts of speech are coined. New prepositions, Hanks says, scarcely ever arise: "perhaps, one new preposition every thousand years or so".

Really? I tried checking this by thinking of prepositions which felt as if they might be newish, and looking up their histories in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The two that occurred to me immediately were *alongside* and *via*, and in both cases the dictionary supported my scepticism. *Alongside* is first recorded from 1781 (as a preposition – the adverbial use appears in 1707). For *via* the *OED* records four examples at dates ranging from 1779 to 1882 – though in each case the word was italicized in the original quotation, and in two cases it was given an accent to mark it as a Latin ablative rather than nominative, suggesting that throughout the period it was not yet thoroughly naturalized into English. (By now it surely is a fully English word – my personal experience suggests that it has been such at least since the middle of the twentieth century.)

Thus we seem to have at least two new prepositions in less than 250 years; and I have not systematically searched an electronic dictionary, merely looked up in a printed edition a couple of words which occurred to me.

In the same passage, Hanks makes even larger (though vaguer) claims that the only classes of lexical item whose numbers increase "significantly" over historical time are proper and common nouns; new verbs, he feels, are exceptional. I should have thought that novel verbs are coined fairly frequently. Thinking of verbs in *-ize* beginning with early letters of the alphabet, I quickly found (from the sixty years preceding first publication of the relevant *OED* sections): *alphabetize* first recorded

1867, *anthemize* 1837, *atomize* 1845,[1] *bowdlerize* 1836, *caramelize* 1842. None of these are technical scientific terms, which Hanks concedes as exceptions to his generalization, and I have little doubt that a systematic electronic search would yield far more examples.

Furthermore, the findings above relate to new vocabulary items, but the "norms" with which Hanks is centrally concerned are senses of words. Most people, surely, would suppose that the rate at which existing words develop new senses or modify their senses is more rapid than the rate at which new words are coined (although the former is much harder to quantify).

It seems reasonable to conclude that, on a human timescale, the relevant aspects of language are more distant from cartography and closer to the boiling saucepan than Hanks's theory suggests, even if many would argue that the most faithful picture will lie somewhere between these extremes.

But in any case my analogy is too simple. The froth on the boiling pan does form objectively determinate shapes if one takes a short enough time-interval, as with photography. In the case of language, reducing the interval does not really help, because the structure of a language has no objective existence apart from the many individual speakers of the language. Each speaker seeks to conform his usage to the system he infers as underlying the usage of others, but each of those others is likewise working on the basis of fallible hypotheses about current usage, and new speakers – children – are constantly joining the community and developing their own models of the surrounding language from scratch. Nowhere is there a well-defined standard, by reference to which a given individual's language-model might be judged fully correct, or incorrect only in specific, limited respects.

Taking this into account, I suggest that the creative picture of language behaviour really does become more plausible than the picture of language as governed by clearcut "norms".

Grice and conversational co-operation

One strategy Hanks uses, in order to reconcile his belief in rule-governedness with the manifest fact that literal meanings of natural-language forms are less cut-and-dried than generative linguists have supposed, is to suggest that rule-governedness is to be sought at another level, not the level of individual lexical items.

For instance, at many points throughout his book Hanks appeals to Paul Grice's theory of conversational co-operation, which Hanks discusses in detail and treats as authoritative truth. Indeed, Hanks's closing peroration (p. 429) characterizes his own Theory of Norms and Exploitations as an attempt to make Grice's ideas more fully explicit.

According to Grice (1975), conversational communication works because participants in conversation co-operate by conforming their utterances to certain "maxims", shared knowledge of which enables hearers to reconstruct the

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[1] As a transitive verb; an intransitive verb meaning "believe in the atomic theory", really a separate word, is recorded once from 1678.

communicative intent lying behind the superficial logical sense of speakers' words. Hanks lists Grice's maxims on his p. 89: they include, for instance, "Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary", and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence". For Hanks, some such co-operative mechanism is virtually a logical necessity:

> when people speak to each other, they are trying to cooperate in an activity in which they have a mutual interest. This, at any rate, is what every utterer who is not a solipsist must assume.

Hanks states as a truism on p. 345 that "human linguistic behavior is cooperative social behavior".

My first problem with Grice is that his maxims seem clearly wrong as a description of many conversations. Did Grice have no garrulous acquaintances who routinely rambled on about topics entirely irrelevant to the nominal point of a conversation, and who frequently made dogmatic assertions that far outran the available evidence? (Is there anyone who does not know someone like that?) These and others of Grice's maxims seem so breathtakingly out of line with much real-life conversation that I have sometimes wondered whether I was misunderstanding him, and whether garrulity of this kind somehow did not contradict the correct interpretation of his maxims. In fact, though, I believe Grice meant just what he seemed to say, in which case he was seriously mistaken.

But Grice also made a deeper mistake with his assumption that the essence of conversation is an attempt to co-operate to achieve a common good. There will be some examples of conversation for which that is true, but if it were *generally* true then conversation would be a very unusual kind of social behaviour. The social sciences more widely have understood since Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* of 1776 that social interactions are normally about *exchange* rather than about shared goals. As Smith ([1776] 1976: vol. 1, 26–7) famously put it, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." In conversation, too, we give because we want to get; there is no solipsism in denying that conversation is necessarily co-operative. An example I used at a conference on Grice's theory (Sampson 1982) was a conversation between captured spy and interrogator: the goals of the participants are thoroughly opposed, yet they can still talk to one another and the words are not just meaningless noise.

Again, it could be that I have misunderstood, and that Grice's idea is consistent with the interrogation scenario. But I think not. At the conference in question, Grice responded to my objection with a remark about Adam Smith being one of the great writers whom he had never read; his lofty tone suggested that he saw this as a palpable hit against Sampson (and sycophantic sniggers indicated that many of the audience agreed), though to me it was an embarrassing confession of ignorance. Humanities scholars of Grice's generation were a herbivorous bunch on the whole, and many linguists held and still hold sentimental background assumptions about talk being a domain of life where normal conflicts of interest are absent or can be ignored. But I do not believe that any Grice-like system of "maxims" or "implicatures" will help to rescue Hanks's assumptions about rule-governedness

from the messy relationships we find among dictionary meanings and speakers' intentions. A particular utterance might well be shaped by its speaker partly in response to some Grice-like axioms, but the axioms will be at least as labile and open to innovation as the meanings of the individual words used.

Probabilistic rules

Another move Hanks sometimes makes in the attempt to reconcile rule-governedness with messy usage is to appeal to the concept of probabilistic language rules. He suggests that generative linguistics in its heyday was unable to use this concept because the necessary data were inaccessible, but

> With the advent of large corpora, all this has changed; it is now possible to measure the syntagmatic and collocational preferences of words and relate these preferences to meanings. (p. 104)

What Hanks calls exploitations "need to be separated out and either ignored or dealt with probabilistically, as was proposed in preference semantics (Wilks 1975; Wilks, Guthrie, and Slator 1999)".

An unwary reader might perhaps imagine that, by conceding that language rules can be probabilistic rather than absolute, Hanks has taken the wind out of the sails of one who argues that language usage is unpredictably creative. We would not need the latter assumption to explain why a word or construction is not always used in a consistent way. Notice, though, that a serious "probabilistic" language description will be no less formally cut-and-dried than a traditional generative grammar. Indeed, it will contain more formal information: not just a set of absolute rules, but rules containing alternatives together with precise, numerical information about probability distributions over the alternatives, specification of the maths of how probabilities associated with separate rules interact, and so forth. If someone reacts to traditional generative linguistics (as Hanks appears to do) by instinctively feeling "real-life language is not so neatly precise and well-defined as that", then it is odd if the same person would find a probabilistic grammar more congenial.

Furthermore, it is easy enough to put forward the suggestion that any seemingly messy aspect of a natural language might be captured by some hypothetical set of well-defined probabilistic rules, but the suggestion will not be very persuasive unless backed up at least by one or two small-scale examples – without that, why should we believe in probabilistic rules rather than in unresolvable messiness? Hanks does nothing like that in this book. The closest he gets (p. 240) is in a discussion of an example taken from the *Guardian Weekly* (13 Nov 1993):

> [Chester] serves not just country folk, but farming, suburban, and city folk too. You'll see Armani drifting into the Grosvenor Hotel's exclusive ... Arkle Restaurant and C&A giggling out of its street-front brasserie next door.

Hanks comments:

> speech-act verbs such as *giggling* prefer a [[Human]] subject; prepositional phrases such as "out of [[Location]]" imply movement; *brasserie* is a

[[Location]]. These preferences combine to induce a weak (but correct) probability that *C&A* can be coerced to the semantic type [[Human]] and *giggling* can be coerced to be a verb of movement.

"Weak probability" sounds as though Hanks has some set of explicit rules, not tailored to this specific example, but which respond to the example by yielding a probability above zero but well below 0·5 for e.g. assignment of the feature [[Movement]] to the lexical entry *giggle*. But there is no hint in Hanks's book that he or his associates have actually developed a specific structure of probabilistic rules which give that particular result in this particular instance. Yet without that, it seems equally plausible (to my mind, more plausible) to say "the only way that occurs to me to make sense of this example is to take *C&A* to refer to women who buy their clothes at C&A, and *giggling* to mean walking while giggling – but these are extempore guesses in response to the particular example, not the outcome of general algorithms, and certainly not of algorithms with numbers attached".

(Incidentally, *is* "giggle" a "speech-act verb"? I thought it was a kind of laughing rather than a kind of talking, but perhaps this is just one more illustration of the variability of natural language.)

Departing from norms is normal

If there is no identifiable discontinuity between higher-frequency "normal" uses and less common "exploitations", surely it becomes implausible to suggest that all the rarer uses of a word are learned along with the "norms" as part of the work of acquiring one's native language? Rather, the "exploitations" occur because speakers are sometimes or often creative in their use of language. To quote Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836: 57, my translation), "Language … is not a finished product, but an activity".

I do not argue that *most* instances of a word's use will observably depart from previously-established uses, or that such departures when they do occur will typically be large leaps – more often they will be little steps.[2] But using words in ways which depart from the "norms" for those words is itself a normal kind of linguistic behaviour. And since there is no neutral gold standard for usage, what feels like a normal use for one speaker will sometimes feel like an "exploitation" for another.

Take Hanks's list of British National Corpus concordance lines for *condescending*. If I reflect on what *condescend* "normally" means to me, I would say that it implies a certain kind of relationship between two parties, *A* and *B*, where *A* is *B*'s superior either in reality or in *A*'s own estimation. But one of Hanks's concordance lines comes from a book I know, Michael Frayn's novel *Towards the End of the Morning*. Bob is invited to dinner at the home of his work supervisor Dyson and Dyson's wife Jannie, and after dinner Bob and Jannie decide to watch an old film on television.

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[2] It would be rash to try to state limits on the size of possible creative leaps, though. I.A. Richards (1936: 126) quoted an unnamed linguist who claimed that there must be limits to the possibility of metaphorical sense-extensions, offering the example that *house* could scarcely be used even metaphorically to refer to bread. Taking this as a challenge, Richards came up with a line by Gerard Manley Hopkins which does just that, in a quite natural fashion.

The novel continues (Frayn [1967] 1977: 66): *"Condescending lowbrows," said Dyson sourly.* Here it is not clear who *B* could be, unless perhaps *B* is the television or the film itself (this was a period when television was seen by the educated as a suspect medium devoted largely to entertaining the masses); and *lowbrows* seems to contradict the requirement that *A* should be superior. As I understand *condescend*, party *B* must be capable of awareness of the condescender's attitude; to condescend to an inanimate thing would be like insulting a tree. But evidently the word cannot mean for Frayn precisely what it means to me. (The novel continues with Dyson ringing the changes on *lowbrow*, *highbrow*, and *middlebrow* in a fashion that leaves me no wiser about his or Frayn's sense of *condescend*.)

That is a case where an example which, for Hanks, apparently exemplifies a norm would have to count for me as an exploitation. Compare that with Hanks's discussion of the verb *climb*, which he considers at some length, developing points made about this word by Charles Fillmore, Ray Jackendoff, and Anna Wierzbicka (pp. 99–104 and 107–11). The first corpus extract Hanks quotes under a heading "Examples of exploitations, metaphors, and uncertainties" runs *How good are the beetles at climbing cereal plants and locating aphid...* It is not quite clear why Hanks treats this as an abnormal usage, but his Appendix 4.1 seems to imply that, for him, the "normal" subject of transitive *climb* has to be either human or a vehicle – "any use of the English verb *climb* not accounted for by this prototype is either an exploitation (literary trope, metaphor, etc.) or a mistake" (p. 102). And there are constraints even in the case of vehicles as subjects. Hanks quotes, apparently with approval, an assertion by Wierzbicka (1990) that "if a train went quickly up a hill it couldn't be described as 'climbing' "; Hanks asks "Is using *climb* to denote a train going uphill a performance error?"

Here, Hanks seems to see abnormality or metaphor (or mistake) in usage which strikes me as perfectly normal. I would think of a central sense of *climb* as being something like "go up with effort". To me it feels irrelevant whether the subject is human or beetle. (Agreed, there will be many more concordance lines for human subjects, but that is merely because humanity spends more time talking about itself than talking about beetles.) And (to me) it feels absolutely normal for a train to be said to *climb* a gradient. Most of us know Auden's poem *Night Mail*, about a mail train making the journey from London over the hills of southern Scotland to Glasgow, and containing the lines *Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb*, and *Dawn freshens, the climb is done.* Admittedly, poetry is specially given to figurative usage; to me these phrases do not feel like examples of that, but if someone disagrees (or objects that Auden is using *climb* as noun rather than verb), then let me offer another passage which I came across by chance the day after reading this part of Hanks's book, in a prosy popular book of local lore. It referred to

> two railwaymen, Thomas Scaife and Joseph Rutherford, who were killed when their steam locomotive blew up while climbing the nearby Lickey Incline, the steepest gradient on the British main line network. (Winn 2005: 256)

(The relevance of "quickly" in Wierzbicka's assertion is unclear to me. Speed is relative; obviously a railway train can never move as fast on an adverse gradient as

it can on the level, but even in the days of steam I believe I am correct in saying that a train climbing Beattock Summit would have outpaced the fastest human athlete.)

These are no more than suggestive examples, and in the present context a more extended and systematic enquiry would not be feasible. But I hope they suffice to lend at least *prima facie* plausibility to the idea that one speaker's "exploitation" will often be another's "norm", and *vice versa*. (For a rather fuller discussion of this point of view, see Sampson 1980.)

Mistakes

I am particularly sceptical about Hanks's idea that usage deviating from the norms recognized by his theory might be, not even "exploitations", but plain mistakes. Clearly, language-users do make slips of the tongue or pen, but I wonder whether these have much real relevance to the messiness of word senses in real-life usage. When Hanks asserts (p. 245) that "Users of a language, including highly skilled users, regularly make mistakes", his main example is a spelling error (*sow* for *sew*). Spelling mistakes have very little to do with the indefiniteness of word senses. But even if a slip of the tongue involves using a word in a sense to which, for the speaker, the word does not quite apply, how can a hearer know that? (The hearer might know it if the speaker corrects himself, but in that case the momentary error is neither here nor there.) To the hearer, the "mistaken" utterance will just be one more datum to use in inferring what the society around him means by the word in question. If similar errors are repeatedly made with a given word, presumably the "normal" meaning of the word will eventually change accordingly.

In connexion with grammar, Hanks writes (p. 248) "A mistake, even if repeated many times, is still a mistake". Coming from a member of the discipline of linguistics, that is an extraordinarily Platonic concept of language as an ideal system. It was a mistake when someone, perhaps a child, first regularized the past participle of *help* by saying **helped* rather than the correct *holpen*. But we have been repeating that mistake for quite a while now: would Hanks really not concede that the erroneous form is now the correct form? I feel sure he would concede it, and anyone who concedes the point for grammar must surely concede it far more readily for the less codifiable domain of word sense.

In fact Hanks does appear to accept this when he writes (p. 246) that "Mistakes are not infrequently the source of new norms", offering as an example a shift in the sense of *refute* from "demonstrate by logical argument the error of a proposition" to "strongly deny". In this particular case I believe Hanks is mistaken about the history of the word (both senses have ancient historical precedents), but he is surely correct about the general point that today's mistake is tomorrow's standard usage.

People are not machines

This seeming contradiction is characteristic of Hanks's book. More than once, an apparently strong, falsifiable theoretical claim about the nature of human language is advanced, but then in the small print (as it were) the claim turns out to be undercut by some statement which sounds much more reasonable, but which contradicts the theory. Hanks brings to linguistics a deep knowledge of the issues

that arise in practice in high-quality lexicographic research, and this is something which our discipline has sorely needed. His stance as a scholar aiming to locate truth in the reasonable middle ground between two extremes is an attractive and likeable one. And certainly few linguists would fail to gain by reading this book, which covers many issues that I have no space to mention here (some are discussed in ways that I agree with, others not). But in the end I find nothing here to convince me that it is an error to see language as an activity in which creativity is one essential component. Creativity, in any area of human life including language, is not something that can be predicted or reduced to a matter of statistics or probabilities. People are not machines.

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