

# What a word means in a given context

Siva Kalyan  
Australian National University

Much has been written about how to determine which of the various contextual meanings of a word are part of its lexical representation—which of them count as “senses”, as opposed to mere “uses” (Cruse 1986; Evans 2009; Geeraerts 1993). However, to my knowledge, no one has discussed the more basic issue of how to determine what the contextual meanings of a word are in the first place. In this poster, I suggest some criteria for identifying the semantic contribution of a word in a given context of use. In particular, I propose that a word exhibits a particular semantic property in the context of a given expression, to the extent that:

1. The semantic property is compatible with the meaning of the expression as a whole; and either
2. The word is used frequently as part of a phrase whose referent exhibits that property; or
3. The property is being used contrastively.

While this proposal can (and should) be tested experimentally, the following observations (among others) seem to support (and illustrate) it:

1 and 2 are consistent with Glucksberg’s (2003, i.a.) findings on metaphor comprehension. Consider a sentence such as *My lawyer is a shark*. Although *shark* occurs most frequently as part of a noun phrase referring to a kind of fish (as opposed to a kind of person), this property is inconsistent with the referent of *a shark* in this context (a certain type of person). The only properties that satisfy both criteria are those that apply to both sharks and the type of person being described (viciousness, aggressiveness, etc.); hence, these are the only semantic properties contributed by the word *shark* in this context (in accordance with Glucksberg 2003: 93–95).

Further support is provided by tests of sensehood, which can now be understood as contexts in which a word is “forced” to have a certain contextual meaning; the acceptability of this usage—its “sensehood”—can then be understood as an indication of how typical this meaning is among the attested contextual meanings of the word. For example, to test whether *expire* has a sense that is schematic for both “die” and “become invalid”, one uses a sentence such as *?John and his driving licence expired last Thursday* (Cruse 1986: 61). Here, both “die” and “become invalid” would have properties incompatible with the meaning of the sentence (violating criterion 1). Hence the only possible meaning of *expire* in this context is one that is schematic for these two readings. The oddness of this sentence indicates that such a schematic meaning is not typical of the contextual meanings of *expire*.

To take another example: to test whether *horse* has the sense “male horse” (just as *dog* has the sense “male dog”), one uses a sentence such as *?Mary likes mares better than horses* (Cruse 1986: 60). In this context, *horse* has the property “male” as part of its semantic contribution (even though it does not usually occur in a phrase referring specifically to a male horse—criterion 2 is thus inapplicable), because it is being used in contrast with female horses (criterion 3). The oddness of this sentence indicates that such a specific meaning of *horse* is atypical of its attested range of contextual meanings.

## References

- Cruse, D. Alan (1986) *Lexical Semantics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.  
Evans, Vyvyan (2009) *How Words Mean*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
Geeraerts, Dirk (1993) Vagueness’s puzzles, polysemy’s vagaries. *Cognitive Linguistics* 4(3), 223–272.  
Glucksberg, Sam (2003) The psycholinguistics of metaphor. *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 7(2) 92–96.