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Varieties of lexical variation

Abstract

This paper presents the theoretical background of a large-scale lexicological research project on lexical variation that was carried out at the university of Leuven in the last three years. The project is situated in the framework of Cognitive Semantics in the sense of Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1990), Geeraerts (1989b), and Taylor (1989); it links up with the explorations of the relevance of prototype theory for lexicography as presented in Geeraerts (1985, 1987, 1989a, 1990). The empirical results of the project will not be presented in detail in this text; see Geeraerts et al. (1994). Rather, the text will concentrate on the definition of the various forms of lexical variation that have to be distinguished. In particular, it will be argued that the classical distinction between semasiology and onomasiology insufficiently distinguishes between alternative categorization as a conceptual phenomenon and formal variation involving variation of a sociolinguistic, contextual nature.

Deciding what to wear is one thing – but deciding how to name what you are wearing is no less a matter of choice. Suppose you are putting on a pair of trousers made of strong blue cloth, such as are worn especially for work or as an informal kind of dress. Various lexical alternatives then suggest themselves: *jeans*, *blue jeans*, *trousers*, *pants*. But the options do not have the same value. *Jeans* and *blue jeans*, to begin with, have another meaning than *trousers* and *pants*: jeans are a type of trousers, whereas *trousers* names all two-legged outer garments covering the lower part of the body from the waist down, regardless of the specific kind involved. (In the technical terms of lexical semantics, *jeans* is a hyponym, or subordinate term, of the more general, superordinate term *trousers*). *Pants*, on the other hand, represents a more complicated case than *trousers*, because it may be used both for the general class of trousers, and for a man's underpants. (In this case, *pants* is technically speaking a synonym of *underpants*). The latter kind of usage, however, appears to be typical for British English. At the same time, *pants* in its more general reading is an informal term in comparison with *trousers* (but then again, this is a stylistic difference that occurs specifically in British English).

All the data in this example, summarized in Figure 1, have been taken from the first edition of the *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (1981). Precisely because they involve lexical and semantic variation, it may well be the case that the data in the figure do not adequately capture the intuitions of all native speakers of English: the variation may be even more extensive than suggested here. The point about Figure 1, however, is not to achieve

descriptive completeness with regard to *pants* and its cognates, but to illustrate the various types of variation that have to be taken into account in descriptive lexicological research.

The various kinds of lexical variation involved in the example, then, may be systematically distinguished in the following way. First, there is the fact that words may mean several things, as with the more restricted and the more general reading of *pants*. Second, the same kind of referent may be named by various semantically distinct lexical categories, as illustrated by the choice between *jeans* / *blue jeans* and *trousers* / *pants*: even though *jeans* and *pants* are not synonyms, there are situations in which both are appropriate names for a particular garment. In fact, any time *jeans* is appropriate, the hyperonymous term *pants* will be suited as well; the reverse, of course, is not the case. Third, the same kind of referent may be named by various words, which may or may not differ from a semantic point of view; this type of variation, then, encompasses the previous one. The choice between *trousers* and *pants* (in its general reading), for instance, may be influenced by considerations of formality and stylistic appropriateness, but does not involve denotational semantic differences of the type distinguishing *jeans* and *trousers*. Even though they do not have precisely the same stylistic value (at least in British English, *pants* is more informal than *trousers*), *trousers* and *pants* (in its general reading) are equivalent as far as their meanings are concerned. Therefore, in a situation in which a particular garment may receive the name *jeans* or *pants* or *trousers*, the pairs of alternatives have a different status. In choosing between *jeans* and *trousers*, for instance, the choice is not just between words, but between different semantic categories. In choosing between *trousers* and *pants*, on the other hand, the choice is between words that are semantically equivalent, but that are invested with different stylistic values. Finally, the stylistic distinction that exists between *trousers* and *pants* is an example of a more general contextual type of variation, involving the fact that a specific lexical phenomenon (such as a preference for expressing a particular meaning by means of one item rather than another) may be subject to the influence of contextual factors, like a speech situation asking for a particular style, or geographical distinctions among groups of speakers.

	British English		American English
	formal	informal	
two-legged outer garment (in general)	<i>trousers</i>	<i>pants</i>	<i>pants / trousers</i>
men's underwear	<i>underpants</i>	<i>pants</i>	<i>underpants</i>
trousers made of strong blue cloth	<i>jeans / blue jeans</i>		<i>jeans / blue jeans</i>

Figure 1
Sample lexical data on pants and cognate terms

The four types interlock and overlap in intricate ways. Contextual variation, for instance, is not restricted to the formal side of the language, but touches upon the semantic phenomena as well. In the example contrasting *trousers* and *pants* (in its general reading), the contextual, stylistic variation involves words that are otherwise semantically equivalent. However, the meaning variation exhibited by *pants*, also correlates with contextual factors of a geographical nature: contextual variation (the fourth type mentioned above) may cross-categorize with the semantic variation mentioned as the first type above.

The following terminological distinctions capture the different kinds of variation that we have informally identified above. *Semasiological variation* involves the situation that a particular lexical item may refer to distinct types of referents. *Onomasiological variation* involves the situation that a referent or type of referent may be named by means of various conceptually distinct lexical categories. *Formal variation* involves the situation that a particular referent or type of referent may be named by means of various lexical items, regardless of whether these represent conceptually different categories or not. *Contextual variation* involves the situation that variational phenomena of the kind just specified may themselves correlate with contextual factors such as the formality of the speech situation, or the geographical and

sociological characteristics of the participants in the communicative interaction.

These concepts are illustrated in Figure 2 on the basis of the *pants/trousers*– example as described in Figure 1. The figure may be read as follows. Semasiological variation involves the situation that one word may possess diverse semantic values, as when *pants* may either be synonymous with *trousers* "two-legged outer garment covering the lower half of the body", or with *underpants* "a short man's undergarment worn below the waist". Onomasiological variation involves the situation that the same thing may be identified as a member of different categories. In a given situation, for instance, a particular pair of trousers might be referred to either as a member of the category *trousers/pants*, or as a member of the subordinate category *jeans/blue jeans*. Semasiological and onomasiological variation are both forms of conceptual (or "semantic") variation: they involve differences of categorization. Semasiological and onomasiological variation study lexical categorization from different perspectives: the semasiological approach takes its starting–point in the words naming a conceptual category, while the onomasiological approach takes its starting–point in the things categorized.

conceptual variation	semasiological variation	<i>pants</i> (1) trousers (two-legged garment etc.) (2) men's underwear	
	onomasiological variation	<i>jeans/blue jeans</i> or <i>trousers/pants(1)</i>	formal variation
contextual variation		<i>pants(1)</i> (informal British English) versus <i>trousers</i> (less informal British English)	

Figure 2

An illustration of the major terminologically distinct forms of lexical variation

Contextual variation involves speaker-related and situation-related differences, such as the stylistic differences distinguishing *pants* (in its general reading) and *trousers* in British English. The geographical differences between British English and American English also fall within the class of contextual variation. As explained before, contextual variation is not necessarily restricted to cases such as the *pants/trousers*-example in the figure, which does not involve semantic differences: contextual variation and conceptual variation of the semasiological or onomasiological kind may clearly cross-categorize. Formal variation basically involves the situation that a particular entity may be referred to by means of different words. These different words may express a conceptual distinction, in which case we get onomasiological variation, or they may not, in which case we get, for instance, "pure" geographical variation.

The research project leads to the following two major *empirical conclusions* about the interaction between these various forms of variation. First, lexical choices are determined by the semasiological and onomasiological characteristics of the referents involved: a referent (or set of referents) is expressed more readily by a category of which it is a central member, and it is expressed more readily by a lexical category with a higher entrenchment value. Entrenchment in the sense used here is defined as onomasiological salience; see Geeraerts (1993). A corpus-based operational measure of entrenchment is specified in the context of the project. Roughly, the entrenchment of a lexical category is the probability that the category (rather than an alternative, equally applicable one) will be chosen as a name for its potential referents. Relevant differences of entrenchment may involve hyponyms in comparison with hyperonyms, but also co-hyponyms.

Second, the formal structure of lexical expressions is related to the semasiological and onomasiological characteristics of the categories involved. Semasiologically, the intrinsicness of a semantic dimension or dimensional value correlates inversely with the frequency with which it is expressed as a modifier in a polylexical expression. Onomasiologically, the entrenchment of a category correlates inversely with the frequency with which it is named by means of polymorphemic items.

The *innovative nature* of the project resides primarily in the fact that it offers a more comprehensive picture of lexical variation than so far available. In particular, it combines the recent developments in lexical semantics (epitomized by prototype theory) with an onomasiological perspective, and with the contextual study of variation as usual in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. It extrapolates prototype semantics from semasiology to onomasiology, by demonstrating that the semasiological characteristics of lexical categories highlighted by prototype semantics (such as the existence of salience effects) also occur in the onomasiological realm. In addition, it shows how semasiological structures of meaning and onomasiological processes of naming both interact with contextual factors of a sociolinguistic and pragmatic nature.

The *consequences for lexicography* of the terminological distinctions introduced here basically boil down to the requirement that the various forms of variation be systematically distinguished in the dictionary. Although the very example used in this text demonstrates that this is already the case in some dictionaries, it has to be noted that a systematic attempt to incorporate the different forms of variation in the dictionary has to take at least three major hurdles. First, incorporating onomasiological variation as defined above into dictionaries is a novelty. Signalling the existence of alternative forms of categorization, in fact, will not suffice: it is equally necessary to indicate the preference relationships among the various categories involved. (This notion of categorial salience is an onomasiological extrapolation of the notion of semasiological salience as incorporated by prototype theory.) Second, the lexicological data themselves are not readily available. This is, to be sure, not uncommon in lexicography, but the full project from which this text is a sample shows that the interaction between the varieties of variation can only be studied properly by means of methods for data collection and data analysis that are beyond the means of the average dictionary project. Third, the intricacy of the data implies that the presentation of the data requires representational mechanisms that go beyond what is usual in dictionary making. In particular, while semasiological and onomasiological functions are traditionally distributed over different types of dictionaries, the representation of the relationship between the types of variation requires a thorough-going integration of the semasiological and onomasiological representational perspectives.

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