Cottage and Co: Can the theory of word-fields do the job?

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1. Introduction

Essentially, I will in this paper try to make two points: on the one hand, as regards content, there is the obvious issue of analyzing and describing the meaning of names for houses in English. One the other hand, from a theoretical point of view, I am going to argue that a traditional, purely language-immanent word-field approach is inadequate for the semantic description of lexemes like cottage, bungalow, mansion and others. This theoretical interest will have priority in my paper so that due to limited space some details regarding content, interesting as they may be, will have to be put aside.

In order to show the inadequacy of field-theory I will, after some preliminary remarks on the origin of the data and on field delimitation, pursue my argument in three steps: first, I am going to propose what I consider an exemplary but fairly reasonable analysis in the paradigm of field-theory. Second, I will criticise this analysis by singling out some of its major shortcomings. In the third and final step, I will present an extended and revised solution to the problem using pragmatic concepts such as speech situation and notions such as prototype and internal category structure, which are derived from the so-called cognitive approach to word meaning.
2. Preliminary remarks

The data for this study was obtained by means of informal interviews with 14 informants in London in 1989. The interviews were conducted by means of a questionnaire and by means of drawings of houses and comprehensive and detailed written summaries of the answers to the questionnaire. In addition to the interviews with "normal" speakers, I spoke with an architect and with three employees of an estate agency to acquire some expert knowledge in the field.

As for the question of field delimitation I side with Leisi's view (1985:107) that there are no immanent and objective criteria for delimiting a certain field. In the end, field delimitation is always arbitrary. In order to save precious time let me therefore simply name the two or rather three criteria I have used for both external and internal field delimitation:

(1) Semantic criteria: Archisememes:
   a) For the whole field: [building that is used for dwelling]
   b) For the field center: [building whose primary purpose is dwelling]

(2) Morphological criterion: morphologically simple lexemes.

The morphological criterion defines our target area as a "word-field" in the narrow sense of the term as proposed by Lipka (1980: 95). Thus, syntagmas such as manor house, detached or semi-detached house and country house are excluded from the study.

If we apply these three criteria, our target field comprises the lexemes shown in figure (1).

archisememe: [building that is used for dwelling]

3. Field analysis

The result of my exemplary field analysis is represented in figures (2) and (3) in the form of tree diagrams.
4. Evaluation and criticism

In what follows, I will not dwell on the indisputable merits of a field approach to semantic analysis. Instead, I will try to draw attention to what I consider as serious shortcomings of my exemplary analysis.

First, my tree diagrams give the impression that we are dealing with clearly defined classical categories. However, my informants' assessments strongly indicate that there is a pronounced inter- and intrasubjective variation concerning the meaning of the lexemes. Thus, on the dimensions, we do not get rigid border lines between categories, but rather fluid transitions, scales and continua. Mansions and palaces for example can be imagined in a rural setting like a cottage just as well as in a city. Material can be used as a distinctive dimension only in the righthand branch of diagram (2). For the larger houses in the other branch the variability of the informants' opinions was too pronounced to acknowledge the distinctive status of this dimension. Here, as well as in other parts, the tree diagrams suggest precision that does not exist in linguistic reality.

Second, there is the question of polysemy. If we wish to include polysemous lexemes like hut or lodge in the tree diagram we have to split them up into various senses or what Cruse calls "lexical units" (1986:76f). Obviously the different lexical units of one lexeme as e.g. hut are semantically closely related. In the tree diagrams, however, the two lexical units of hut are separated and even assigned to different parts of the field. Lodge is another case in point.

Third, I do not think that the field-analysis can adequately capture the wealth of connotations closely related to the field. The word-field of houses is of extremely high cultural importance. By the very nature of our way of life everybody is more or less concerned with buildings and houses. This can be seen from the fact that my interview partners had an unexpectedly clear and determined idea of what kind of people would typically live in say a cottage or a bungalow. And, what is even more interesting: they were more ready and willing to give information on this question than on matters of material or setting. The same applies to other questions in the questionnaire, which were concerned with the character of the interior design, the informant's personal attitude towards the types of houses and with any kind of sociohistorical or cultural background that might be associated with the lexemes. Obviously, this kind of information belongs to what is traditionally called the connotative (Leech 1981:12ff) or interpersonal (Lyons 1977:51) side of meaning. Features on these dimensions are in the mind's eye of...
the speaker rather than in the extralinguistic referents themselves. They are cognitive rather than linguistic phenomena and yet they are inseparably related to language. By Leech’s definition (1981:13) connotations vary from speaker to speaker. So it does not come as a surprise that on these dimensions we are facing an enormous variability in the informants’ opinions. The only way I can see to integrate this part of the meaning of the lexemes into the diagrams is to use optional features, like the so-called "inferential features" introduced by Lipka (1979:194f; cf. also 1990: 114f). Yet, just as in the case of the information concerning the INHABITANTS, it is a striking fact that informants respond with particular eagerness and willingness to questions like "would you like to live in a bungalow?" or "how do you imagine the interior of a villa?" So, what by some linguists is considered as a minor appendage to "real" or denotative meaning seems, in the minds of speakers, to be of rather high importance. To take account of this massive cultural background simply by means of optional features seems in my opinion a gross simplification of the linguistic facts. In particular such an analysis fails to account for the fact that some types of houses esp. cottages, lodges and villas are valued highly in the opinions of most speakers while others are held in contempt.

Fourth, there is the old and thorny problem of overlaps between categories. Overlaps of meaning such as between the lexemes villa and mansion or hut, chalet and lodge are not reflected in the diagrams. As I remarked earlier on, the obvious overlaps between the different lexical units of one lexeme also do not appear. Thus, meaning relations within and between lexemes are not mirrored in an adequate way in the tree diagrams; e.g. the relation between hut and cabin, which is an example of synonymy - according to my informants the difference lies in the typical SETTING, namely {North America} or {Black Forest} for cabin and {Britain} for hut - this synonymy is not made visible.

To sum up, the shortcomings of a traditional field approach to our target word-field go back to the following three deficiencies: 1) The inability to reflect adequately the linguistic phenomena of vagueness and polysemy. 2) The inability to account for the whole complexity of overlaps and meaning relations' between the concepts in the field. 3) The inability to describe adequately the massive connotative part of the meaning of the lexemes and to integrate the relevant socio-cultural background in the description.

5. The revised and extended solution
Let me now come to what I have deliberately called my "revised and extended solution", because it is a not a totally different approach, but is based on the structural methods we have used so far. That is to say that the pragmatic and cognitive suggestions I am going to make do not replace but only supplement the field-analysis.

5.1 Prototypical categories
The first stop in modifying the field-analysis is to acknowledge the fact that we are dealing with prototypically structured categories. For each category we can find prototypical members which display a large number of distinctive and optional features and less prototypical or peripheral members deviating in various respects. Thus, a prototypical cottage has a thatched roof; a cottage with a tiled roof can still be called a cottage, but it is a less prototypical one.

Now, what forces us to postulate prototypes - besides the reason that nowadays it is trendy to do so? Are there any indications for doing so in the data?

The strongest piece of evidence for a prototypical category structure is to be found in the most frequent answering strategy of the informants. As a rule, my interview partners first described their own prototypical conception or some sort of cliché or stereotype associated with the types of houses. In most cases these ideas were later “hedged” by means of expressions like "typically", "mostly", "usually" or by explicit qualifications of the type "but it needn’t ... [e.g. have a thatched roof]”. This was also the most frequent remark made by the people who were asked to comment on the written summaries. In the same vein we can interpret the uncommonly frequent use of labels such as "especially" or "usually" in relevant dictionary entries. These labels reflect the variable nature of the categories that does not lend itself to definitions that use necessary and sufficient criteria. Instead a prototypical category structure seems much more appropriate to reflect the nature of the data.

5.2 Internal category structure
Now, despite all the enthusiasm for the concept of prototype we must not forget that we have not really made a lot of progress as compared to a field analysis supplemented by inferential features. This is what we have done so far: we have acknowledged that vagueness is a linguistic fact instead of a descriptive embarrassment, and we have de-
scribed the attributes that can help to single out a category prototype. But, as I show in theoretical detail in Schmid (1993), that has taken us only halfway. Now we have to tackle the tricky question of the category periphery. In other words, we have to ask in what ways less prototypical category members differ from the prototype and why they do so. Not until we have answered this question can we claim that we have effectively laid bare the entire category structure. At the same time this will give us an opportunity to install socio-cultural background and connotative meaning into our descriptive apparatus.

Leaving aside polysemy for the moment, we can trace deviations from the prototype back to basically three factors, viz. a) the properties of the extra-linguistic referent, b) the socio-cultural context, and c) the situational context. I will deal with these in turn.

a) Properties in the extra-linguistic referent
The most obvious reason why category members deviate from the prototypes lies in the fact that objects in reality do not come in pre-packaged categories, but as individual entities. As such they are subject to what Quine (1960:125f) has called "referential vagueness". Undoubtedly however, this referential vagueness cannot be unlimited. If I could call any kind of house a "cottage" the communicative process would sooner or later break down. So there must be certain limits. Yet the question remains how we can find out where the borders are.

In my opinion the only way to make predictions about the limits of referential vagueness is a combined view of various dimensions. As Rosch (1977:28ff) has pointed out, attributes of concrete objects do not occur in random combinations, but form clusters; that means, in the case of houses, we are normally not confronted with e.g. very small and at the same time extremely complex and luxurious houses, or huge houses with basic or even fragile constructions. Besides this evident correlation between the dimensions SIZE and CONSTRUCTION we get a number of other parallels, viz. between SETTING and MATERIAL, SETTING and CONSTRUCTION, and PRIMARY PURPOSE and various other dimensions.

Let me, by way of example, briefly discuss the correlation between SETTING and MATERIAL for cottage and bungalow. Of course the combination [rural] SETTING and [stone] as MATERIAL for cottage is by no means accidental. On the contrary, in the country, stone is easily available and cheap. In addition it is appropriate as a strong and sturdy material to provide shelter from the rough country weather. Bungalows, on the other hand, are built in sheltered suburban areas where there is no need for heavy material and the most convenient materials such as bricks or concrete can be provided without major transport costs. As a consequence it would be uncommon for a cottage to be made of brick or a bungalow to be built from stone.

Thus, we have seen how referents in reality do vary, but only within certain limits provided by attribute clusters. In order to find out these limits, however, we must realize that there are cognitive phenomena that are relevant for our use of language. In particular, we have to take into account socio-cultural knowledge about the world we live in.

b) Socio-cultural context
It is a well-known fact that it is extremely difficult if not impossible to build comprehensive models of the knowledge we have about the world. Therefore we have to restrict ourselves to the most obvious and relevant aspects of our socio-cultural knowledge. I will present these aspects in the form of what Lakoff (1987:68ff) calls an "idealized cognitive model" or ICM. Here is my tentative proposal of an ICM for the field of houses:

People in our climatic zones need sheltered places to live in. So they build houses. Depending on their personal taste and their financial possibilities, each person or family can choose their own type of house. Thus, there is a clear correlation between a house and its inhabitants, and as a consequence, houses are not just built and bought for functional reasons but also for reasons of prestige. Without a doubt, a house functions as a status symbol.

As for the prestige associated with a certain type of house there are rather well-established clichés which have to be considered as an important part of the ICM: on the positive side, we have large charmingly designed houses situated close to the city centre, but still with a rather rural sort of environment and atmosphere. In contrast, small and basic houses that evoke cheapness and are situated in densely populated suburban areas are rated as unattractive. In addition, the overall outer appearance and the presumed interior play an important role: cosiness, quietness, taste, warmth, individuality and idyll score high, whereas coolness, anonymity, uniformity, conventionality and nondescript appearance lose out.

If we relate this ICM to the central field area we can account for the positive evaluations of cottage, lodge and villa; for cottage the connotations of cosiness and quietness overrule the lacking size; for
lodge the feature [rural atmosphere] is of decisive importance; villa as opposed to mansion profits primarily from the associations with the Mediterranean and from the aura of tasteful luxury.

Extra-linguistic referents that do not fit this ICM cause deviations from the prototype. Uncomfortable cottages and inviting and cosy bungalows with an individual flavour are analogous to Fillmore's (1982:34) and Lakoff's (1987:69) examples of the pope and Tarzan who do not fit the ICM of bachelor.

Naturally, the ICM varies from speaker to speaker according to social background and other variables. Therefore it has to be emphasized that we are dealing with an idealized cognitive model. Despite all the possible variations amongst the speakers in a speech community I maintain that this socio-cultural context provides the background for the situational variants that I am going to discuss now.

c) Situational context - speaker - hearer
At last, we have now entered genuinely pragmatic terrain. That such pragmatic or sociolinguistic factors as situational context including the speaker and hearer can also have an impact on the meaning of words and can cause deviations from the prototypes shall now be demonstrated with reference to three typical speech situations.

One speech situation that typically involves the use of names for houses is the conversation between an estate agent and a prospective buyer of a house. This situation is highly significant for us, because estate agents try to take advantage of the connotations of a word. As a consequence - and my interview partners in the estate agency were quite frank about this - names like cottage and lodge are used deliberately for the most extraordinary houses to evoke associations of cosyness and rural atmosphere. Corrupted uses of this sort cause deviations from the category prototype.

Another interesting situation is the naming of houses. In rural areas especially, but also in respectable suburban neighbourhoods you can still find quite a considerable number of signs bearing the name of the house. In my opinion it is no surprise at all that again cottage and lodge are the favourites. Names like Rose Cottage or White Lodge clearly reflect the emotional bond between the inhabitants and their house. Considerations as to the normal use of these words are here clearly of secondary importance.

The third typical speech situation I would like to mention probably reveals most clearly the stereotypical ideas that I have tried to cap-

ture with my ICM. These are utterances of the type "They live in a ... [e.g. a cottage]". Deviations from the prototype in these situations are probably rather rare. They could, however, be caused by emotional factors such as maliciousness, envy or irony.

5.3 Conclusive survey
Let me, for my conclusive survey refer to figure (4) (on the next page). While looking at it we have to keep our ICM in mind, which is responsible for the missing details especially concerning the so-called connotative part of meaning.

By comparing diagram (4) with diagrams (2) and (3) one will realize that apart from the dimension INHABITANTS, which is taken care of by the ICM, figure (4) gives all the information contained in (2) and (3). But figure (4) goes way beyond that. First, it reveals the graded structure of the categories. In the diagram the bold boxes represent the category prototypes whereas the thin lines stand for the category peripheries. The prototypes only overlap in the case of polysemous lexemes. Overlaps of this kind indicate that there exists a strong semantic relationship between the two variants of meaning. Overlaps of prototypes can also account for shifts in the meaning of a lexeme. In this way, and this is the second advantage I would like to mention, the "cognitive" method of representing our word-field can account for polysemous lexemes (cf. e.g. hut or lodge).

Third, the diagram integrates the whole complexity of category overlaps. You will have noticed how the category peripheries intersect to build a very complex network of what is in cognitive linguistics called "family resemblances" (cf. Rosch & Mervis 1975). For 'palace', 'mansion' and 'villa' e.g. my representation gives an idea of the close relation and the fluid transitions between the three categories.

Fourth, the diagram gives an idea of the two most important attribute clusters in the field.
I hope to have shown in this paper that the envisaged form of representation combined with the ICM and the reference to typical speech situations is more adequate for the description of our field than a traditional field-approach.

Notes

1. Other ways of representing a word-field (cf. Lipka 1980:108ff) like box-diagrams or matrix-representations are in this case clearly less appropriate.

2. Let me clarify the typographical conventions I have used: dimensions are printed in capitals, semantic features are inserted in square brackets, while optional features, following a convention introduced by Lehrer (1974) and also used by Lipka (1980), are put in braces. The abbreviations [uc], [mc] and [wc] used as features on the dimension INHABITANTS stand for [upper class], [middle class] and [working class] respectively.

3. I here use the term日上午 in the sense of denotative synonymy, i.e. identity of potential referents.

4. It should be mentioned here that there are of course a large number of variants of field-theory for which the mentioned shortcomings and inabilities apply to varying degrees. Thus e.g. Lutzeier (1981,1982, this volume) explicitly includes sense relations into his analyses and descriptions of word-fields.


6. Cf. Lutzeier (this volume) who discusses the related question how far peripheral category members can deviate from the prototypes of a category.

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