

## The Classification and Coding of Descriptive Elements

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**Descriptive Elements**

### Introduction

The preceding sections contained information about coding the physical surroundings in which the dream takes place, the characters in the dream, the various activities they engage in, what uncontrollable events befall the characters, and how they felt about what happened to them. In addition to noting that objects and people appeared in a dream and that certain events took place, dreamers may also describe some attributes and qualities of objects, people, actions, and emotional states. They say it was "a red car," "a large house," "an old lady," "a crowded church," "a cold day," "a crooked stick," "an intense fear," or "an ugly dog." In dream reports, a person may be characterized as "running rapidly," "working very hard," or "dancing beautifully." Dreamers may also note the passage of time -- "we seemed to be riding for about an hour" -- or refer to a particular time -- "it was midnight." They may also describe things, people, and happenings not in terms of what they were but in terms of what they were not: "It was not my mother." We call all of these *descriptive elements*.

In coding descriptive elements, three different scales are involved: the modifier scale, the temporal scale, and the negative scale. Each of these will be discussed below and illustrated by coding examples.

**NOTE:** The categories and scales to be presented in this section -- especially the temporal and negative scales -- have not been routinely used in most studies. They are to be used by highly committed investigators, or to test very specific hypothesis, or when there seems to be a striking occurrence of an element that fits into one of these descriptive categories.

### Modifiers

A modifier is any adjective, adverb, or phrase that is used for descriptive elaboration. Since any object can be classified with regard to an extremely large number of attributes, the number of modifier classes could be a large one. We have limited the number of classes to nine. These nine represent those upon which satisfactory reliability could be obtained and for which psychological significance probably exists. Each of the nine classes can be considered to represent bipolar qualities, and each class of modifiers is therefore coded with a plus or minus sign to indicate which pole of the modifier is represented.

### Color

(Coding symbol: C.) Any mention of color or a color name is coded unless the term is used to describe an emotional state. Chromatic colors are coded C+ and achromatic colors (black, white, and gray) are

coded **C-**. The same color can be coded more than once if it refers to separate things. In the following examples, the reader is reminded that italics represent nonscorable elements.

"She was wearing a BLACK (**C-**) and YELLOW (**C+**) striped dress and was carrying a BLACK (**C-**) purse."

"The rainbow contained a great many COLORS (**C+**)."

"The WHITE-haired (**C-**) gentleman rose when I entered the room."

"Her cheeks turned RED (**C+**) with embarrassment."

"It was a *dark night*."

"I felt sad and *blue*."

"I called him a *yellow* coward."

"She *blushed* as the cheap *silver* utensils were put on the table."

"The dark-haired stranger was with a *blond* woman."

## Size

(Coding symbol: **S**.) This class contains all references to the largeness or smallness of things. Descriptive terms indicating a large size such as big, huge, thick, tall, high, broad, and deep are coded **S+**. The antonyms of these terms such as small, tiny, thin, short, low, narrow, and shallow are coded **S-**. The concept of size is ordinarily thought of as being appropriate only for objects which have height, width, and length -- that is, for three dimensional objects. As is evident from the above list of terms, we code a reference to any one of these three physical dimensions as a size term. References to the temporal dimension as when an interval of time is described as short or long are not coded as size modifiers. It should be remembered that although many nouns such as midget or giant could be classified as indicating size differences, it is only the modifying terms that are included in the modifier scale.

"I climbed a HIGH (**S+**) wall and ran down a NARROW (**S-**) street between TALL (**S+**) buildings."

"This boy, who was SHORT (**S-**), had on a shirt that was too SMALL (**S-**) for him and a LONG (**S+**) tie with TINY (**S-**) polka dots."

"A FAT (**S+**) lady with a MINIATURE (**S-**) poodle was walking down a WIDE (**S+**) street."

"I waited a *long* time for the train to arrive."

"We had a *narrow* escape."

"The baby was sitting on a ledge of the *skyscraper*."

## Age

(Coding symbol: **A**.) References to a person being old or to an object being old are coded **A+**. References to a person being young or to an object being new are coded **A-**. Synonymous terms for old, young, and new are also scorable as are comparative age terms such as older and younger. Only these bipolar distinctions in age are included in this class, and mention of a character's specific age is therefore not coded.

"The YOUNG (**A-**) man was driving a NEW (**A-**) car."

"I walked up to this ANCIENT (**A+**) mansion and an ELDERLY (**A+**) man greeted me."

"My OLD (**A+**) boyfriend laughed at my YOUNGER (**A-**) brother."

"All of the rooms in this MODERN (**A-**) hotel had furniture of the LATEST (**A-**) style."

"I cuddled and sang to this *baby*."

"My grandfather is *80 years old*."

## Density

(Coding symbol: **D**.) Modifiers included in this class must refer to a bounded area or to some type of container. References to such areas or containers as being full, bulging, or crowded are coded **D+**. If such areas or containers are described as empty they are coded as **D-**.

"The church was CROWDED (**D+**) with people."

"I felt STUFFED (**D+**) after the large meal."

"The elevator was JAM-PACKED (**D+**) with passengers."

"His wallet was BULGING (**D+**) with dollar bills."

"The suitcase was EMPTY (**D-**)."

"The tree trunk was HOLLOW (**D-**)."

"I was unable to move in the *crowd*."

"*No one* was at home."

"I was all *alone* in the big house."

## Thermal

(Coding symbol: **T**.) References to contrasting temperatures are included in this class. Things that are described as warm or hot are coded **T+**; things that are described as cool or cold, are coded **T-**. Other descriptive terms that refer to measurable qualities of temperature are also scorable. Objects that are inferentially known to be hot or cold or descriptions of verbal interactions as heated, etc., are not coded.

"I suddenly felt WARM (**T+**)."

"The water seemed FRIGID (**T-**) when I stepped into it."

"The wind was CHILLY (**T-**)."

"The cowboy was cooking something over a *fire*."

"The *ice* on the lake was covered with *snowy* slush."

"He spoke *coldly* to me when I said that he wasn't such *hot* stuff."

## Velocity

(Coding symbol: **V**.) This class contains references to the speed with which objects or people move. Fast movement is coded **V+** and slow movement is coded **V-**. Speed of mental activity is codeable if described in such terms as quickly or slowly, but the word "suddenly" is not coded.

"I walked FAST (**V+**) down the street."

"I drove the car SLOWLY (**V-**) through the RAPIDLY (**V+**) flowing stream."

"I QUICKLY (**V+**) calculated the answer and wrote it down."

"*All of a sudden*, I realized that this man who had *stopped* the truck was some sort of spy."

"She *ran* to meet her father who was *limping* toward her."

"The train was *suddenly* going about *70 miles an hour* down the tracks."

## Linearity

(Coding symbol: **L**.) References to whether an object possesses linear or nonlinear qualities are included in this class. Objects that are described as straight or flat are coded **L+**, and objects that are described as

curved, crooked, or in synonymous terms are coded **L-**. Knowledge that an object is straight or curved is not sufficient grounds for coding; the dreamer himself must indicate that attention was paid to these qualities of linearity.

"Ahead, the road across the **FLAT (L+)** prairie rose and **TWISTED (L-)** around the mountain."

"The girl with the **STRAIGHT (L+)** hair asked the **CURLY-haired (L-)** girl for a match."

"The floor was **WARPED (L-)** and the walks were very **BUMPY (L-)** .

"She drew a *line* with the *ruler*."

"He wanted a *straight* answer as to whether the deal was *on the level* or *crooked*."

## Intensity

(Coding symbol: **I**.) Contained within this class are modifiers that are used to describe force or expenditure of energy. Modifiers indicating a strong intensity are coded **I+**; modifiers indicating a weak intensity are coded **I-**. Intensity modifiers may refer to either physical or mental energy or to emotions and sensations. Simple mention of an emotion generally associated with a strong affect is not sufficient for coding; the dreamer must use some intensity modifier such as very, or greatly, in order to be considered scorable.

"There was a **LOUD (I+)** clap of thunder followed by a **BRIGHT (I+)** flash of lightning and a **STRONG (I+)**, **VERY (I+)** cold wind."

"I worked **VERY HARD (I+)** on solving the physics problem."

"I felt **TERRIBLY (I+)** happy for the winner and **SLIGHTLY (I-)** sad for the loser."

"It was a **QUIET (I-)**, **DIMLY-lit (I-)** room and as my boyfriend held me **GENTLY (I-)** in his **STRONG (I+)** arms, I became **A LITTLE BIT (I-)** aroused."

"The husband became *furious* because his wife kept *screaming*."

## Evaluation

(Coding symbol: **E**.) This class covers evaluative remarks that are made about people or objects. Since so many terms could be considered to represent a judgment, opinion, or evaluation of some sort, we found it difficult to obtain any appreciable degree of coding reliability until we finally limited our coding to only two areas. These two areas are those of aesthetic and moral evaluation. Descriptions indicating that something is considered aesthetically pleasing or morally correct are coded **E+**; descriptions indicating the aesthetically unpleasant or morally incorrect are coded **E-**. Reference to any type of stimulus considered to be pleasant or unpleasant to the senses is included in the aesthetic area. Included in the moral area are references to personal conduct as being right, correct, appropriate, or approved, as well as references indicating the opposite kind of evaluation.

"The sunset was **BEAUTIFUL (E+)**."

"This **HANDSOME (E+)** boy asked me to dance while the band played a **LOVELY (E+)** tune."

"A **DIRTY-LOOKING (E-)** man came out of a **SHABBY (E-)** hut."

"I thought that was a **TERRIBLE (E-)** thing for him to say to his mother because she had always been **GOOD (E+)** to him.

"She made a *wrong* turn and caused a *bad* accident."

"None of my answers were *right* on the quiz and I felt *terrible*."

## Temporal Scale

In a dream report, there may be references to various time intervals, or to particular points in time. Such temporal references are indicated by the coding symbol **T**. No distinction is made between long and short units of time; thus, unlike the bipolar modifier scales, + and - differentiations are not included as part of the coding symbols. (The thermal class is also indicated by the coding symbol **T**, but the + or - sign is always included in the thermal coding.) Examples of the two subclasses of temporal references which are coded are included below, as well as examples of situations which are not coded.

1. You should code references to a specific unit of time such as a minute, hour, day, week, or year and references to a nonspecific interval of elapsed time.

"My girl friend spent the **DAY** with me."

"He worked on the **NIGHT SHIFT**."

"My roommate went home for the **WEEKEND**."

"My mother had had the ring for **MANY YEARS**."

"A **FEW MINUTES** later I got up and went outside."

"He kept me waiting for a **LONG TIME**."

"We talked for A **WHILE** and then he asked me to dance."

2. Code references to a particular time for the purpose of dating an event.

"It was **EARLY IN THE MORNING** when we started out."

"I said I would meet him about 10 **O'CLOCK**."

"**AT THAT MOMENT**, I saw a snake cross the road."

"I thought to myself that the examination is **TODAY**."

"We were planning to go on a picnic **TOMORROW**."

"It was the **FOURTH OF JULY**."

*Do not code* the age of a person.

"She was *ten years old*."

"My father is *middle-aged*."

*Do not code* the use of the word "time" when it refers to an occasion.

"I had a good *time*."

"I had a real hard *time* starting the car."

*Do not code* sequence of events.

"*After* the parade, we went to get something to eat."

"*Then* the *next* thing that happened, we were in a car."

"*After* struggling hard, I *finally* got free."

*Do not code* salutations in which there is a reference to the time of day.

"He said *good night* and left."

"I yelled *good morning* to the mailman."

## Negative Scale

The third scale used in the classification of descriptive elements is the negative scale. Some dreamers use direct, straightforward language in describing just what happened in their dreams, while other dreamers take a much more devious approach and describe what was not happening or what something did not resemble. Since these differences in descriptive approach can be discerned in reading dream reports, we decided that a negative scale should be constructed that would reflect these stylistic differences. This is the only scale in which comments by the dreamer on his dream such as "It was not a long dream" are coded. Scoring examples for the two types of negative words are given below. The coding symbol for negative words is N.

1. Use of any of the common negative words such as *no*, *not*, *none*, *never*, *neither*, and *nor*.

"There was NO one at the door when I opened it."

"It was NOT a gun but a bottle that the man had in his hand."

"When I asked him for some candy, he said he had NONE."

"My brother NEVER wears a tie."

"It was NEITHER my mother NOR my father, but some strange couple that was living in our house."

"I recognized the person in my dream, but I can NOT remember who it was now."

"There were NO other people in the dream."

2. Use of negative words that are created by adding certain prefixes to adjectives or adverbs. When these prefixes are added and used in such a way that the word *not* could be substituted for the prefix without changing the meaning, the word is counted as a negative. These prefixes are *un-*, *im-*, *in-*, *il-*, *ir-*, and *non-*.

"I was UNSURE of my ability and thought I would be INCAPABLE of doing it."

"His behavior was INEXCUSABLE and he broke an IRREPLACEABLE vase."

"We were UNAWARE that what we had done was IMPROPER but the policeman said it was ILLEGAL."

"The mechanic said it was a NONESSENTIAL part that was missing."

"It seemed *imminent* that he would be *imprisoned*."

"I thought I was *infatuated* with this boy *until* I saw him *inebriated*."

"After the bomb exploded, the sky was *illuminated* and I knew the *irradiation* had begun."

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