

Lexical Semantics

Assignment 1: Sample solutions

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Question 1: Senses or facets?

The English word *magazine* (*Magazin*, *Zeitschrift*) can refer to (a) a physical object, (b) its informational content (text), or (c) an institution or entity:

- (1) a. I left the magazine on the plane. [PHYSICAL OBJECT]
- b. This magazine has an interesting article on proposed new housing in San Francisco. [CONTENT]
- c. Last month the magazine was sued by an angry former employee. [INSTITUTION]

- (a) Show that these three notions of *magazine* are **discrete** (distinct or different). Give two pieces of evidence for the discreteness of each notion, and explain the relevance of your examples/evidence.

In order to show that the [PHYSICAL OBJECT], [CONTENT], and [INSTITUTION] notions of *magazine* are discrete, we need to show that it is possible to refer to each of the three notions independently of the others. In other words, we need to show that there are contexts of use which refer to a magazine as a physical object, in terms of its content, or a magazine as an institution, without necessarily also referring to one or more of the other notions. Cruse suggests several diagnostics or tests which target the possibility of independent reference.

For instance, if the notions [PHYSICAL OBJECT], [CONTENT], and [INSTITUTION] are discrete and independent of one another, then we expect that each of these notions will participate in sense relations which exclude the other two notions: that is, we expect that each distinct notion will have superordinates (hypernyms), subtypes (hyponyms), or component parts (meronyms) that are not simultaneously superordinates, subtypes, or component parts of one of the other notions. This expectation holds for the three notions of *magazine*, and is most easily shown by considering meronyms of the three notions. When it is used to refer to a physical object, *magazine* has meronyms such as *cover* and *page*, which refer to components of the physical magazine, but which are not components either of the content of the magazine or of the magazine as an institution. Similarly, while an *article* or *illustration* might be a component of a magazine's content, they are not necessarily

subcomponents of either a physical object or an institution. Finally, as an institution, a magazine might have subcomponents representing different departments (an editorial department, a sports department, a fashion department), but neither a physical object nor the magazine's content has department subcomponents. This indicates that the three notions are autonomous and can be isolated in reference.

A second diagnostic for discreteness is the independence of truth conditions for the different notions of *magazine*. If a proposition can be true of a magazine with respect to one notion, but simultaneously false with respect to another, this shows that these two notions can be referred to independently (and, indeed, in these contexts must be referred to independently in order to determine the truth of a particular proposition). Cruse suggests that one easy way of testing this is with a predicate like *like*:

- (2) Do you like this magazine?
 - a. I like this magazine; the articles aren't the most interesting I've ever read, but it's light and the pages are easy to grip.
 - b. I like this magazine; the colour scheme isn't very nice, but the articles are always fascinating.
 - c. I like this magazine; the articles they publish can be hit or miss, but they pay their reporters well and offer a great health insurance package.

In (2a), it is not necessarily true that the speaker likes the magazine with respect to its content, but it is true that she likes it as a physical object. In (2b), the notions are reversed: she suggests that she does not like the physical properties of the magazine, but she likes it with respect to its content. Finally, in (2c), the speaker reports that she is indifferent to the magazine's content, but she likes it as an institution. In each case, it is possible for her to sensibly answer "Yes, I like the magazine" to the question in (2) without requiring that she like the magazine in more than one of the [PHYSICAL OBJECT], [CONTENT], and [INSTITUTION] respects. Thus, it is possible to use *magazine* to refer to one of the notions in (1) without necessarily referring to either of the others, which shows that these three notions are distinct.

[You might also use a third diagnostic test instead of the sense relations or truth conditions test. The metaphorical extension test would be difficult to use here, as *magazine* does not really have metaphorical uses, but you could show that there are verbal predicates that pick out each of the notions of *magazine* without picking out the others – for instance, *put down* or *recycle* would pick out the physical object notion of *magazine*, but not its content or its institutional notion, which *memorize* is something you can only do with the content of a magazine, and *sue* or *shut down* is something you can only do to a magazine as an institution, and not in either of the other respects. To use this test properly, you would want to give complete sentences using these predicates, and say a few words about why they force us to settle on one notion of *magazine* to the exclusion of the others.]

- (b) Do these three notions (PHYSICAL OBJECT, CONTENT, INSTITUTION) constitute three distinct **facets** of a single **sense** of *magazine*? Give some evidence for your

answer. If you answer “no”, then discuss whether the three notions constitute three independent senses, or whether two of the three notions are facets of a single sense, with the third notion representing a distinct sense. Support your claims with additional evidence.

In order to show that two or more notions correspond to distinct facets but a single sense of a particular noun, we need to show that, in addition to being discrete, they also lack basic antagonism. In other words, while showing that two notions are discrete requires that we show the possibility of autonomous reference, showing that they are facets of a single sense requires that we show that they are not fundamentally *antagonistic* – that is, that they can, in certain contexts, be referred to simultaneously by a single use of the noun. We have already shown that the notions [PHYSICAL OBJECT], [CONTENT], and [INSTITUTION] represent discrete notions of *magazine*, so in order to determine whether or not they represent distinct facets or distinct senses, we simply need to check whether they are necessarily antagonistic. One straightforward way to do this is to check for the possibility of *co-predication*: that is, to check whether we can refer to more than one notion of *magazine* with a single use of the word *magazine*, or whether this necessarily results in infelicity or oddness (creating zeugma).

- (3) a. The magazine lying on the table is absolutely fascinating.
- b. The magazine on the table is hard to understand and *was recently sued by a former employee.

Example (3a), modeled on Cruse’s examples of co-predication using *book*, shows that it is possible to simultaneously refer to a magazine as a physical object and to its content without any infelicity. This shows a certain unity between these two notions of *magazine*, intuitively associated with the fact that the physical object gives us access to a magazine’s content. (3a) thus indicates that [PHYSICAL OBJECT] and [CONTENT] are two facets of a single sense of *magazine*, just as Cruse argues that [TOME] and [TEXT] are two discrete facets of a single sense of *book*.

Example (3b), on the other hand, is a pragmatically odd use of *magazine*. In particular, while we can use *magazine* for both the object lying on the table and the difficult content, going on to then refer to *magazine* in its institutional notion creates the effect of zeugma. This suggests that [INSTITUTION] represents a distinct sense of *magazine* from the sense containing both [PHYSICAL OBJECT] and [CONTENT]. Examples like (4) provide additional support for this idea:

- (4) a. The magazine was destroyed by fire.
- b. The magazine supports unionized labour.

In order to evaluate the truth of (4a), we need to determine whether or not *magazine* refers to a physical object or to *magazine* as an institution: it might be possible that a particular copy of a magazine was burned up, but that the magazine as an institution continues on unscathed (or vice versa). This indicates a mutual exclusivity between the physical object and institution senses of *magazine*, which supports a diagnosis of these notions as belonging to different senses of the noun.

Similarly, to evaluate (4b), we need to first determine whether *magazine* refers to the content of a magazine (in which case the magazine might include articles or text declaring support for unionized labour), or to the magazine as an institution (in which case the board of the magazine might have instated policies that support unions). As with (4a), it is possible for (4b) to be true with respect to one of these notions, but false with respect to the other, which supports a diagnosis of the content and institution notions of *magazine* as belonging to distinct senses.

Question 2: Polysemous adjectives?

Do you think that the uses of adjectives *long* and *short* in (2) represent distinct senses of each of these adjectives or a single sense?

- (5) a. This class is long/short.
 b. This dress is long/short.

Give arguments and evidence (examples) in support of your answer. You may focus on just one of the adjectives.

To argue that a word is polysemous, you need to:

- i. show that the two (or more) senses you identify are discrete
- ii. show that the senses cannot be identified as two facets of a single sense.

Note that, since the reading and class discussion focused on nouns, you might have to think a little about how to adapt or modify the diagnostics. You can also argue for different diagnostics, or look at other readings for some ideas (but remember to identify your sources). Your answer should explain the relevance of any evidence or new diagnostics you use.

[You could answer this question in a number of different ways. Based on the ideas presented in class, it would make sense to analyze these uses of *long* and *short* as distinct senses. One way of arguing for the discreteness or distinctness of the two senses would be to invert Cruse's third discreteness diagnostic: just as we argue that two senses or facets of a noun are discrete if there are predicates or adjectives that pick out one meaning but not the other, we can argue that two senses of an adjective or descriptive predicate are discrete if there are nouns that force us to pick one meaning and exclude the other. In this case, nouns that have spatial dimensions but not temporal dimensions (*dress*, *stick*, *pool*, *string*) force us to pick out a spatial use of *long/short*, and nouns that have temporal dimensions but no spatial dimensions (*lecture*, *film*, *play*) force us to pick out a temporal use of *long/short*, but exclude the spatial use.

In order to show that the uses in (5) represent distinct senses and not just distinct facets of these adjectives, you need to show that a single use of *long/short* cannot simultaneously be used for both spatial and temporal measurement. The best way to do

this is to try and use a comparative, where one of the nouns you use requires a spatial interpretation of *long/short*, and the other requires a temporal interpretation:

(6) *The play is as long as the stage.

The pragmatic weirdness (or impossibility) of a comparative like (6) indicates that there is no basic unity between the spatial and temporal notions of *long* and *short*, and thus that they represent distinct senses, and not just distinct facets of a single sense.]