

Why WordNet Should Not Include Figurative Language, and What Should Be Done Instead

Patrick Hanks

¹ Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences

² Brandeis University

Email: hanks@bbaw.de

I shall argue that figurative language has no place in WordNets, FrameNets, MRDs, or any other lexical resource. Lexical resources should list norms of language use, not dynamic exploitations of norms. Interpreting figurative language should be achieved by other means. However, first we have to be quite clear about what we mean by ‘figurative language’.

Confusion arises because so many norms of language use are of figurative origin. For example, *object* (in all literal senses of the modern word) originated as a Latin metaphor: ‘something thrown in the way’. The literal meaning of *subject* in Latin is ‘something thrown under’. *Ardent* feelings are literally burning feelings. Ouch! Lakoff and Johnson have shown other ways in which many of our most literal uses of language have metaphorical origins or associations.

The commonly made distinction between figurative and literal meaning is a red herring. It is not useful. Much more important is the distinction that can be made between conventional language use and dynamic language use, i.e. between norms and exploitations.

I shall discuss, using corpus evidence, examples such as the following:

- *keep one’s head above water* (literally and figuratively);
- *a geometrical proof is a mousetrap* (Schopenhauer);
- *the “mousetrap” in American football*;
- *hazard a guess, hazard a destination*;
- *worm, virus*.

I shall look at the treatment of these words and expressions in WordNet and suggest possible improvements. I argue that language in use consists of uses of words that are either norms or exploitations. Until we know how to recognize a norm (astonishingly, we don’t), there is not much point in talking about how to process exploitations, such as figurative language. The first priority, therefore, is to provide recognition criteria for norms of word usage. The norms can, in principle, be associated with WordNet entries, but a great deal of corpus pattern analysis is needed.

Why don’t we know how to recognize a norm? In part because we still yearn for necessary conditions. In lexical semantics there are no necessary conditions. It is time to take seriously the proposal of Fillmore (1975), that the meaning of a word in a text should be interpreted by measuring similarity to a prototype. Fillmore’s proposal is currently being implemented as FrameNet, with its focus on semantic frames. The Theory of Norms and Exploitations (TNE; Hanks, forthcoming) differs from FrameNet in that it provides syntagmatic criteria for normal uses of individual words (to which meanings, synsets, translations, frame roles, etc. can be attached).