

# Relational Semantics and the Anatomy of Abstraction

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## Abstract

This book presents a study of meaning relations, linking the philosophical tradition of conceptual analysis with recent theories and methodologies in cognitive semantics. Its main concern is the extent to which analyzing meaning relations between cognate words reveal the infrastructure of the actual and mental lexicon, assuming that language mirrors thought. Sovran aims to elucidate their infrastructure and the metaphorical and perceptual models that constitute abstract concepts, dealing finally with the role of abstraction in poetic metaphors. Overall, this volume addresses major contemporary issues in the philosophy of language and theoretical semantics.

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| Chapter 1<br>Introduction              | Deals with the notions of concepts and conceptualization, abstract concepts, and with their status in conceptual analysis.   |
| Chapter 2<br>Background and<br>methods | Conceptualization in general and in cognitive semantics and the search for structure. The basic assumptions of the study are that the lexicon is structured and that it is comprised of lexical domains, relations between words are informative, the abstract lexicon is structured as well; metaphors, idioms, models and polysemous lexemes are informative and are basic to human thought and human language. Perceptual models can be detected through etymologies, metaphors and idioms.   |
| Chapter 3<br>Similarity                | 'Similarity' is an abstract and problematic relation. In some sense everything is similar to or is like everything else. Yet words like 'similar', 'resemble', 'like' their cognates, and their Hebrew parallels are useful in normal discourse and are applied automatically. Longstanding logical and philosophical problems are confronted here by a semantic analysis of the use of similarity words and their meaning relations. By comparing data from both English and Hebrew 'Similarity' is shown to be a cluster of notions that are unified in a specific way. 'Similarity' contributes to the flexibility of the conceptual system and its ability to expand. The puzzling nature of similarity is shown to be rooted in these specific cognitive functions. |
| Chapter 4<br>Difference                | 'Difference' is generally considered to be the opposite of 'similarity'. This chapter analyzes the semantic relations between 'difference' and its cognates such as 'diversity', 'variety', 'otherness', 'separateness', 'exception', 'opposite', 'alternative', 'replacement'. It shows that these shades of 'difference' are crucial for concept formation as well as for understanding reality. Inner relations between 'difference' words help discover the role of more abstract relations that constitute the concept of 'differences'. Three general dimensions of cognition emerge: 1) the spatio-temporal dimension, 2) the logical dimension, and 3) a deep  |

pragmatic level of human preferences and values. Basic visual models, image schema and metaphors constitute the various kinds of 'difference' and make up the cognitive map of 'difference' and its nuances. The findings from English and Hebrew shed new light on the relations between perception logic and language.

Chapter 5  
Negativity

This chapter explores the semantic variants of the general notion of 'negativity' and the meaning relations between words such as 'broken', 'absent', 'disappear', 'no', 'lack', 'hell', 'poison', etc. It is based on the hypothesis that there is a Neg-element common to these and other lexemes, and that this element has a special status in the actual and mental lexicon. The analysis of meaning relations among Neg-words in English and in Hebrew reveals four sources of 'negativity'; i.e., four layers in the conceptual system: the somatic-experiential level comprising psychological signals and thresholds, interactional social elements, the culture-dependent Neg-element, and the least transparent fourth layer that is made up of a pre-logical conception of 'identity', 'existence', 'functioning' and 'stability' and its counter Neg-elements. The analysis provides an explanation for the human bias toward the positive. It also explains the everyday 'algebra' of pluses and minuses as reflected in the saying 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'.

Chapter 6  
Truth

'Truth' is polysemous in several languages and ranges over distinct, almost opposite, meaning domains. It is related to beliefs, loyalty and trust and is often associated with religious sentiments. But it is also tightly connected to epistemological and discourse procedures of 'telling the truth', verification and proof. Here the diachronic aspect is brought to the fore: the long history of the polysemous nature of 'truth' (*emet*) in Hebrew reveals how its meaning has evolved and sheds light on shifts in cultural foci. New meanings emerge from life styles, needs and interests that lead to changes in the overall conceptual system. The Hebrew abstract concept of 'truth' evolved from actual experience in the real perceptual world to less accessible areas of emotions, belief, cognition, discourse, and science.

Chapter 7  
Norm

'Normal' is a descriptive adjective whereas 'normative' is prescriptive. This chapter discusses the leap from the descriptive adjective 'normal' to the prescriptive notion 'normative'. The chapter examines a vast range of language phenomena including English and Hebrew etymologies and adverbial metaphors in the domain of 'norms'. The meaning relations between cognate lexemes in English such as 'order', 'in order', 'average', 'usual', 'ordinary', 'right', 'sane', 'convention', etc. help reveal the structure of the semantic frame of 'norm'. The idea of 'norms as thresholds' emerges from the usages of the English construction 'over-x', as in 'overdose' and its Hebrew parallel *x-yeter*. It is shown that models, metaphors and actual experience in the physical world play a key role in constructing the abstract concept of 'norm'. Health, sanity and functional instruments lend their structure to abstract concepts of 'norm' in cooking, gardening, politeness, ethics, law, work relations and political and social behavior as well as

aesthetics and art.

Chapter 8  
Abstraction and  
poetic metaphor

This chapter examines the role of abstraction in decoding metaphors, especially poetic metaphors. The analysis sheds light on general issues of meaning relations and the structure of the lexicon. It is claimed here that: 1) There is a semantics of metaphor; 2) Metaphors, including innovative poetic metaphors, are governed by rules that in turn govern the process of accepting and interpreting metaphorical utterances; 3) One theory should deal with both kinds of metaphors - poetic metaphors as well as discourse or conceptual metaphors; 4) Metaphors have a logical-semantic basis; 5) A model of decoding and interpreting innovative metaphors is presented that involves a process of ascending the scale of abstraction.

Chapter 9  
Conclusion

Summarizes the contribution of relational semantics to the structure of abstract concepts and revealing hidden traits in the conceptual system.