

Negotiating about lexical meanings

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Abstract

One central issue in the generative lexicon approach is how to account for the context dependence of certain aspects of the meanings of lexical items. Pustejovsky (1995, 2005), Ginzburg (to appear) and Ginzburg and Cooper (2004) exemplify how the interpretation of lexical items is influenced by the context of use. An interesting source of data comes from conversations in which the participants spontaneously comment on the appropriateness, or lack of appropriateness, of a particular word or phrase in the given situation. These comments are often introduced by locutions like *It depends on what you mean by X* or *Qu'est-ce que vous entendez par X?* In Swedish there is a lexicalized grammatical construction which functions as a cue to this kind of negotiation about the meaning of lexical items, the *x-och-x* construction. In this paper we show how the *x-och-x* construction is used in spontaneous conversations and informal writing as a means for questioning and clarifying aspects of meaning. The conventionalized *x-och-x* construction thus provides us with a tool to investigate which aspects of meaning language users are aware of and tend to negotiate about. One hypothesis that we will explore is that logical terms like negation and grammatical function words like complementizers are less likely to give rise to negotiations. However, when they are used in the *x-och-x* construction, the negotiation may reveal important aspects of their use in ordinary language.

1 The *x-och-x* construction

The core features of this construction are: (i) a word or phrase *x* that has been used in a preceding sentence or utterance is repeated twice in a coordinate structure *x och x* ('*x* and *x*') (ii) which

is followed by a comment in which the speaker/writer explicates his or her reasons why *x* is not quite appropriate in this context. We first illustrate some typical uses of the *x-och-x* construction.¹ (1) is an excerpt from a dinner conversation between six young men speaking Finland Swedish.²

(1)

- 01 G: dom bodde där oppe på (0,8)
02 var Träskberg står nu å,
03 sen så beslagtogs huse å,
04 dom **flytta** tibaka ti (0,7) ti
Ham[burg] (å)
05 M: nå **fly:tta å flytta** ja menar
va (.) fän kan du göra.

G: "they lived up there where Träskberg stands now, then the house was repossessed and they **moved** back to (0,7) to Hamburg (and)

M: well **moved and moved** I mean what the hell can you do."

On line 4, G uses the word *flytta* ('move house'). On line 5, M repeats this word, using the *x-och-x* construction and then provides a comment 'I mean what the hell can you do' (when your house has been repossessed by the authorities). By using the *x-och-x* construction, M signals that even if it is correct to describe the event as a 'move', there are certain connotations of the verb *flytta* that are not appropriate here, for instance the connotation that the move is self-initiated and voluntary. Since G has already mentioned that the house had been

¹ Lindström and Linell (to appear) provides an extensive overview, in Swedish, of the functions of the *x-och-x* construction and a comparison with similar constructions in related languages. A short presentation in English can be found in Lindström (2001).

² The excerpt is a slightly simplified version of example (22) in Lindström and Linell (to appear). See Appendix for transcription conventions.

repossessed, the people presumably were forced to move, which is the aspect M brings up in his comment.

(1) is an example of what Lindström and Linell call *other-responsive* uses of the *x-och-x* construction. One participant uses a word *x*, another participant picks up on *x*, producing *x-och-x* followed by a comment in which s/he clarifies some aspect of *x* which s/he perceives as inappropriate in that context. In (2) we give an example of a *self-responsive* use. A historian is being interviewed on Swedish Radio on the topic of elite schools in Nazi Germany. (Slightly abbreviated version of example (35) in Lindström and Linell.)

(2)

(.) men-eh (.) eh (.) ja de va (.)
delvis **normal** skolgång men-eh (.)
eller ja, **normal** å **normal** men (.)
man ägnade mycke tid åt fysisk
fostran å gymnastik å sedan så
småningom också (.) militära
övningar.

“but-eh eh yes, it was a partly **normal** schooling
but-eh or yes, **normal and normal** but one
devoted much time to physical education and
gymnastics and then gradually also military
exercises”

The historian first describes the schooling as *normal*, then interrupts himself and, after some hesitation markers, produces *normal å normal* followed by the additional information that one devoted ‘much time’ to physical education. The listeners can then infer that this was probably more than in a normal curriculum at the time.

2 An example of *x-och-x*

Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs all occur in the *x-och-x* construction. Adjectives appear to be particularly common. For example the adjective *ny* (‘new’) occurs relatively frequently in this construction. In a recent paper, Norén and Linell (to appear) investigated 130 occurrences of *ny och ny* in Swedish texts on the internet. They found that all core aspects of the meaning of *ny* recorded in contemporary dictionaries of Swedish can be subject to negotiation, which, indirectly, provides evidence for the lexical content of the dictionary definitions but not for the enumeration of them. The latter result is in accordance with the view put forward by Pustejovsky and Bouillon (1996), that

generative mechanisms and the polymorphic nature of lexical items provide a way to overcome the inadequacies inherent in such (polysemic) enumerations. Examples (3)–(5) below are taken from Norén and Linell together with their analysis of what the negotiations amount to.

(3) A sees his neighbour B leaving a car that he (A) has not seen before:)

A: har du köpt **ny** bil?

B: **ny å ny**, den e sju år
gammal

A: “have you bought a **new** car?

B: **new and new**, it is seven years
old”

B cancels one of the core meaning aspects of *ny*, ‘short time of existence’, in its absolute sense, while agreeing to the car still being new in the sense ‘new to the owner’. The following two examples are taken from the internet.

(4)

La Defense [...] är en helt **ny** stadsdel
konsekvent byggd i mycket modernistisk
stil. Eller **ny och ny**, det är väl över 30 år
sedan den började byggas, men är ändå i
sin början.

“La Defense [...] is a completely **new**
city district, consistently built in a very
modernistic style. Or **new and new**, it’s
probably more than 30 years since they
started to build it, but it is only in the
beginning phase.”

Here the writer revises his/her own use of *ny*. 30 years is probably too long to be considered a ‘short time of existence’ but compared to the total building time, it may still qualify to describe the initial phase.

(5)

I augusti tillträdde det en **ny**
Generalsekreterare för Svenska
Scoutrådet, Johan Strid. Eller **ny och ny**,
det har aldrig funnits någon förut.

“Last August a **new** secretary general of
the Swedish Scout Council, Johan Strid,
started his work. Or **new and new**, there
has never been one before.”

The phrase ‘a new secretary general’ invokes the meaning that this person is the most recent secretary in a series of secretaries. The comment

however cancels the ‘one in a series’ interpretation and explicates that this is in fact a new post.

Norén and Linell (to appear) conclude that *ny* can be used in situations where normal inferences from core aspects of its meaning, like ‘short time of existence’, ‘new to everyone’ and ‘new in all contexts’, are cancelled and other, more connotational, meanings, like ‘updated’ and ‘fresh’, are foregrounded as being more relevant in the context. They show that speakers use the *x-och-x* construction to cancel, background, foreground and confirm aspects of the word meaning of *x*, as used in a particular situation.

3 Using the *x-och-x* construction to negotiate word senses in actual contexts

The *x-och-x* construction thus turns out to be a highly useful metalinguistic device for bringing out core senses, connotations and presuppositions associated with lexical items. Furthermore, by studying naturally occurring *x-och-x* constructions, we have a way of tapping into speakers’ intuitions about lexical items, a way which is naturally situated in ordinary language use and hence more ecological than trying to probe the speakers by various tests. Let us take a few more examples, looking in more detail at the kinds of explicit references to word senses that the users bring up.

- (6) Äntligen så har vi köpt en större **bil!** **Bil och bil** det är ju en Ford Mondeo (-98), så jag vet inte om den kan kallas bil, men det är i alla fall ett transportmedel.

“At last we have bought a bigger **car**. **Car and car** it is a Ford Mondeo (-98), so I don’t know if it can be called a car, but it is anyway a means of transport.”

(6) is taken from a blog. After the announcement of the purchase of a new car, the writer comments that she is not sure that it ‘can be called a car’. Presumably she has certain ideas about which models of car warrant being called a car. She then justifies her choice of term by writing ‘but it is anyway a means of transport’, which is a way of characterising the car’s function. In Pustejovsky’s lexical semantic structure, this type of information would be part of the TELIC role in the QUALIA structure for ‘car’. The next example involves the adjective ‘good’, which often brings out the telic aspect of the modified noun. (7) is also taken from a blog:

- (7) Nu blir det sängen och en **god** bok! Eller förresten **god och god** - den handlar om

glykemiskt index så det blir nog lätt att hålla sig för skratt...

“Now it’s bed and a **good** book. Or actually **good and good** – it is about glycemic index so it will be easy to keep from laughing...”

‘A good book’ is almost a fixed phrase, used to describe a book that ‘is good to read’, i.e. a book that fulfils its function in a good way. Here the blogger, in the comment following *god och god*, actually provides more information about what she considers to be a good book, viz. one that is fun to read and which makes you laugh.

Looking at actual uses of *x-och-x* constructions, we have come across several spontaneous elaborations which bring up aspects of word senses which are very close to the type of lexical semantic structure proposed in Pustejovsky (1995). The flexible and context sensitive uses of the *x-och-x* construction we have seen in the examples are more in accordance with this model than for example the cognitive model outlined in Langacker (1987). Langacker makes a distinction between nominal and relational words, nouns being the prototype example of the first category and verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions of the second. But, as we have seen in the examples, also nouns like *bil* (‘car’) can be contextually modified, and should be viewed as relational in that sense.

The blog examples in (3)–(7), where the *x-och-x* construction is used self-responsively, have certain similarities with what is sometimes referred to as ‘concessive repair’ (see Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2005, Norén and Linell, to appear). In a concessive repair a speaker reconsiders a previously uttered description and revises or replaces it. The example in (8) from Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson (2005:263) is produced by a teacher who has just complained about the situation in her class.³

- (8) I’m just so glad it’s an in service training day tomorrow so I c’n switch off. Well. Not really switch off but you know. Relax.

According to Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson, a concessive repair involves a response to a prior description (here *switch off*) whereby the speaker/writer concedes that this description was “partially unjustified” (*Not really switch off*) or an “overstatement” and then continues with a “revised

³ (8) is here cited after Lindström and Linell, example (51).

statement” (*Relax*). Just as in the *x-och-x* construction, the language user here overtly reacts to the use of a particular word in a given context. The reaction is followed by a search for an alternative, more appropriate word. In this respect, it is probably correct to refer to this as a conversational repair strategy, although it is a very weak kind of repair. The *x-och-x* construction on the other hand is not primarily a repair strategy. The speakers and writers do not retract the use of the word, nor do they suggest a replacement. Instead, the *x-och-x* construction allows them to ponder over and possibly clarify in what respects the word used is (in)appropriate. Therefore the primary function of the *x-och-x* construction is not as a repair strategy. Note also that conversational repair strategies can have different grammatical forms, whereas *x-och-x* is a conventionalized grammatical expression.

4 Open and closed class words

So far we have shown spontaneously occurring examples where the meanings of open class items have been negotiated. However not all open class items lend themselves equally well to such negotiations. Adjectives and adverbs such as *ny* (‘new’), *god* (‘good’) and *bra* (‘well’) are used frequently in the *x-och-x* construction, whereas adjectives, nouns or verbs with very precise and delimited meanings are not used at all in this construction. A search for *primtal och primtal* (‘prime number’) on the internet yields no hits. Even if mathematicians might spend a lot of time trying to prove that a certain number is prime, there is evidently no discussion about the meaning of being a prime number.⁴ Proper names is another category that don’t show up in the *x-och-x* construction, not even if you are uncertain whether you have got the right name. Note that something like *Mary och Mary* can never be used to introduce comments like ‘I don’t know if she is actually called Mary’ or ‘I don’t know whether this is actually Mary’. Relational nouns like *mamma* (‘mummy’) and *fru* (‘wife’) on the other hand are used in the *x-och-x* construction. The comments often turn around the fact that the person referred to by the relational noun is not the ‘legal’ mother or wife, but is treated as if she were by the speaker, as in example (9)

(9)

⁴ For similar reasons we would not expect to find negotiation about verb phrases like *to be divisible by three*, see Cooper (this volume).

Fru och fru förresten vi har levt i synd i 20 år nu men jag kallar henne fru ändå och känner mig fortfarande lyckligt lottad. ...

“**Wife and wife** actually, we have lived in sin for 20 years now but I call her wife anyway and still feel like a winner. ...”

We will now present some examples of the *x-och-x* construction to illustrate speakers’ awareness of the meanings of ‘logical’ and ‘grammatical’ words. The hypothesis would be that these words don’t occur in the construction, since they are supposed to have precise and delimited meanings (cf. *primtal* above). But it turns out that some of them are used, although not very frequently, in the *x-och-x* construction. When they do show up, the comments reveal interesting, non-logical or non-grammatical aspects, of their meaning. Consider the following examples involving the adversative conjunction *men* (‘but’). (10) is taken from a chat on the internet. *painted* is the nick name of the chatter and *foamy* the name of a friend.

(10)

painted: du var ju typ så jävla ivrig. fick noll kontakt med dig :@. *foamy* var speedad :D **men** sött. eller **men och men**, speedat är sött.

painted: “you were so damned eager, (I) got zero contact with you. *foamy* was stoned **but** cute, or **but and but**, stoned is cute.”

The writer first describes a person as being ‘stoned but cute’, then repeats ‘but’, using the *x-och-x* construction, thereby cancelling the inference that arises from the adversative conjunction that both conjuncts cannot hold: if a guy is stoned, then he is not cute. In example (11), it is rather the conversational impact of starting an utterance with *men* that triggers B:s use of the *x-och-x* construction.⁵

(11)

01 A: (ends a long monologue)

02 B: ”**Men**”

03 A: ”**Men och men**, du hulda ängel, ... jag har inte tid att ordväxla med dig i dag. ...

01 A: (ends a long monologue)

02 B: ”**But**”

03 A: ”**But and but**, you darling angel, ... I have no time to discuss with you today....

⁵ From the novel *Nina* by Fredrika Bremer (1835), somewhat abbreviated.

Although B on line 2 only manages to get across the single word ‘but’, this is sufficient for A to pick up on its function to announce that the upcoming utterance expresses a different opinion. This becomes obvious in her comment ‘I have no time to discuss with you’. It would have been interesting to look at what comments speakers bring up concerning uses of the coordinating conjunction *och* (‘and’) but we have so far not found any instances where it is used in the *x-och-x* construction.⁶ We also have not found examples where subjunctions and complementizers are used in the *x-och-x* construction.

Negation is another word that apparently doesn’t give rise to negotiation. We have searched for the common negation *inte* (‘not’), as well as the more formal *ej*, but have not found any uses in the *x-och-x* construction. There are examples when an utterance with a negation prompts an *x-och-x* construction, but it is typically the rhematic (focussed) element in the utterance, the element with which the negation associates, which is picked up in the *x-och-x* construction. An example is given in (12) from a conversation where some Finnish schoolboys are talking about where they go when they want to smoke.⁷ They have already mentioned that they use to walk down to a stone when one of them mentions a place on the road, a place they end up at because they just can’t be bothered to walk all the way to the stone.

(12)

- 01 M: nössöplats e dendä: .hh som e
dä: på vägen fö att
02 (0,2)
03 M: nä man **orkar** int liksom gå
dit ti ste-
04 eller **orkar å orkar** men

01 M: “Nössöplats is that (place) there on the
road because
03 M: no, one can’t be **bothered** like to walk
there to the stone
04 or **bothered and bothered** but ...”

On line 02, M makes a comment using the control verb *orka* which means ‘have the strength to’. When negated, it often conveys that the subject doesn’t want to, or can’t be bothered, to carry out

⁶ The sequence *och och och* is used rather frequently as a complaining interjection. However, this interjection is prosodically distinct from the *x-och-x* construction.

⁷ This is an excerpt from example (33) in Lindström and Linell.

the action denoted by the infinitival complement. When M then continues *eller orkar å orkar*, he gets across that the issue is not whether they have the physical strength to walk all the way to the stone; it’s just that they can’t be bothered.

5 Quantifiers

Using the *x-och-x* construction as a probe, we have also investigated the situated negotiations that arise in connection with quantifiers and quantifying adverbs. We find several occasions where the speakers negotiate about judgments of size and quantity. Consider the following example found on the internet by Norén and Linell.

(13)

Många hittar till min sida nu för tiden, eller **många och många**, allt är ju relativt förstås. 10 st på en dag tycker jag är många.....:-))

“**Many** (people) find their way to my page nowadays, or **many and many**, everything is relative, of course. 10 in one day I consider many.....:-))”

The writer comments on her own use of *många* that ‘everything is relative’. In this case, determining whether 10 visits to a web page should count as many is relative to one’s expectations and she reiterates that she finds 10 visits a day to be many. An other-responsive use of the same phrase is shown in example (14) from a conversation between a doctor (D) and a patient (P) about being recorded during a consultation.

(14)

- 01 D: jaha du e van vi de här
å-eh (.) bli inspelade?
- 02 P: ja
- 03 D: du har (.) haft **många**
inspelade samtal eller?
- 04 P: ja-eh (.) **många å många**
men de e nära stycken så de
- 01 D: “so you are used to this eh being recorded
02 P: yes
03 D: have you had **many** conversations
recorded?
04 P: well **many and many** but there are quite a
few”

The doctor starts off by asking if the patient is used to being recorded and if she has participated

in many recordings. The patient picks up on the quantifier and produces *många å många*, which suggests that she does not consider this an entirely appropriate quantity expression. She follows up with a comment introduced by *men* ('but') which conveys that she thinks the recordings are 'maybe not many but quite a few'.

Speakers also negotiate about the universe of discourse of the quantifier in the given situation (cf. Peters & Westerståhl, 2006). An example showing the well-known context dependence of *alla* ('all', 'everyone') is shown in (15), taken from a blog called Motherwitch.

- (15) Ansiktsbehandlingen igår var skön. Nu tror **alla** att jag är 10 år yngre. Eller **alla och alla**... Tonåringen tyckte det.

"The facial treatment yesterday was nice. Now **everyone** believes that I am 10 years younger. Or **everyone and everyone** ... The teenager thought so."

What does *alla* quantify over in this use? One might guess 'everyone who knows or meets the writer'. However, the writer immediately revises her own use of *alla* as shown by her use of the disjunction *eller* ('or') and the following *alla och alla*. Her revision amounts to reducing the universe of discourse to her family and then conceding that it was only one family member, the teenager, who thought she looked younger.

In the next example, the issue is whether it is appropriate to use *varje* ('every') when there are only two instances. The exchange is taken from a web page where Pontus makes a comment about the fact that Jinge, a photographer, managed to get a picture showing snow chaos in the city featured as *Today's picture*.

- (16) P: Den där bilden tar du fram **varje** år... :-)
J: Jepp. **Varje och varje**, detta är andra gången. Fast den är bra. Jag slipper ju gå ut och frysa och ta en ny.. :).

P: "That picture you get out **every** year
J: Yup. **Every and every**, this is the second time. But it's good. I don't have to get out and be cold and take a new one."

Jinge first agrees (*jepp*) to Pontus' description, then qualifies the use of *varje*: 'it is the second time'. The comment suggests that although it is logically correct to use 'every' – the photographer has used that picture every year since it was taken – Jinge finds that the use of 'every' invokes a longer sequence of years than the mere two that have actually passed. Maybe his intuition is that 'every' is not the appropriate quantifier expression when the domain only consists of two.

In contrast to the quantifier expressions discussed above, numerals like 23 and exact quantity expressions like *en tredjedel* ('a third') seem never to give rise to negotiation.

6 *Jag och jag (I and I)*

We end with an example involving a personal pronoun. At first one might think that there is not much to negotiate about when it comes to pronouns. According to Pustejovsky (1994:181), pronouns are referentially opaque which means that their qualia structure is "lexically devoid of specific relational information". The following exchange is taken from a so called 'safety call' from a train driver (T) to his nearest train dispatcher (D).⁸ Before we get into the conversation, the driver has asked the dispatcher how come he (T) has a red signal and can't move. D doesn't know the answer to this question but volunteers some information about another train, the 986. The first person singular pronoun *jag* ('I') is normally pronounced *ja*.

- (17) 01 D: däremot har **ja** då nie åttisex står i inne i Granryd
02 T: okej
03 D: eller **ja** å **ja** de e Malmö där som har de men

01 D: "on the other hand **I** have the 986 in Granryd
02 T: okay
03 D: or **I and I** it is Malmö there that has it but"

After the dispatcher has said 'I have the 986 in Granryd' and the driver has acknowledged this (*okej*), the dispatcher partially retracts this claim. By using *ja å ja* he acknowledges that it is not quite clear in what respect he, the speaker, has the train. As the comment reveals, the 986 is really under the control of the next train dispatching area,

⁸ This is an extract from example (34) in Lindström & Linell using a simplified transcription.

which happens to be Malmö. Although the dispatcher has the train on his display, it wasn't quite correct to claim that he actually had any control over it. The example shows that speakers are quite sensitive to uses of personal pronouns which go beyond pure reference.

7 Conclusion

The spontaneous occurrences of the *x-och-x* construction thus turn out to provide information both about various meaning aspects of words and about the conditions of use that speakers attend to. This way it provides interesting data for lexicographers as well as for linguistic attempts to model situation dependent and innovative uses of language. The *x-och-x* construction in Swedish has developed into a conventional device for shifting from using a word to reflecting on it and why it was perceived as not quite appropriate in the given situation. As shown by the authentic examples we have discussed, the construction is used both in informal conversations and writing. The comments volunteered by the speakers and writers provide an array of acute and perceptive comments on various aspects of the meanings of the words in question. The comments support the type of rich semantic structure that is at the heart of the generative lexicon enterprise and may in fact be a highly relevant source of data.

As we have seen, speakers and writers may be prompted to comment on just about any word, on words with rich lexical semantic structure such as nouns, adjectives and verbs as well as on words like conjunctions and pronouns. This shows that the distinction between open and closed word classes is not relevant here. Instead another distinction is more important, the one between precisely and more openly defined words. The more precisely defined words are simply not subject to as much contextual adjustment as others, but there is probably no discrete limit between the classes. Judging from the language users' behaviour, it seems clear that they view the word as the relevant unit to comment on, not the separate senses one might find enumerated in dictionary entries for so called polysemous words. To us, it would seem imperative for any theory of the lexicon to make as much use as possible of real data, i.e. of people's actual inferences, reflections, repairs and comments on their own and their interlocutors' use of words.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

(0 , 8)	pause in seconds
(.)	micro pause
<u>oppe</u>	underline marks emphatic stress
dä :	: marks lengthening