

The meaning of adjective-noun combinations: underspecification versus overspecification

As noted by many authors (e.g. Quine 1960, Lahav 1993, Blutner 2009), many predicates do not behave intersectively. For example, if someone is said to have *brown eyes* this means that the color of her irises is brown, while *brown bread* has to be brown throughout. Similarly, the color denoted by *red* in *red hair* is different from the color denoted by *red* in for example a *red tomato*.

The dominant view in the field of lexical semantics is that lexical representations are underspecified and may be strengthened by the context (e.g. Reyle 1993, Pustejovsky, 1995, Blutner 1998, 2004). However, there are some studies that assume an overspecified lexical representation for polysemous words. For example, Dalrymple et al. (1994) propose the Strongest Meaning Hypothesis to account for the interpretation of reciprocals, which is adapted by Winter (2001) to the Extended Strongest Meaning Hypothesis:

“A plural predicate whose meaning is derived from one or more singular predicates is interpreted using the logically strongest truth conditions that are generated from one basic meaning and that are not contradicted by known properties of the singular predicates(s)”.
(Winter 2001, p. 342)

This principle is also applied by (amongst others) Zwarts (2004) in an Optimality Theory analysis of the interpretation of the preposition *around* and by Hogeweg (2009) for the interpretation of the Dutch discourse particle *wel*. In this presentation I will explore the usefulness of assuming an overspecified lexical representation in addressing the problem of the context-dependence of adjectives.