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Deciphering Novel Expressions: A Proposal for an Integrated Cognitive Meaning Construction Analysis

Rozszyfrowując neologiczne wyrażenia:
w kierunku zintegrowanej kognitywnej analizy konstrukcji znaczenia

INTRODUCTION

This paper is meant to be a humble contribution to the broader discussion on the nature of novel linguistic meaning arising in the process of meaning construal motivated by both the semantic structure of language and mental representations evoked for a particular linguistic scene, driven by the context created and processed by the speaker and hearer participating in a particular discourse.

In this paper I argue that the intricacies of the mental operations and discourse-specific interactions taking place while meaning construction process unfolds in the minds of language users may be accounted for using Vyvyan Evans's (2009) *Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models* theory combined with the *Conceptual Blending Theory* proposed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002), and Ronald W. Langacker's (2008) *Current Discourse Space*. The integration of these distinct, yet, in my view, interfacing cognitive theories shall be seen as an attempt to create a unified and, to some extent, systematised frame of reference for a comprehensive meaning construction analysis of novel expressions involving the three levels of dynamic and context-mediated meaning construal: (i) lexical representation, (ii) conceptual processing, and (iii) speaker-hearer interaction in a particular discourse frame.

2. THE INTRICACY OF ESTABLISHING NOVEL MEANING

The process of meaning construal is highly complex and involves a number of intricate mental operations by means of which the conceptualiser construes the meaning of a given linguistic expression drawing on different resources including lexical meanings and compositional patterns as well as cognitive processes involving, *inter alia*, metaphor, metonymy and conceptual blending. Most importantly, however, the process of meaning construction relies heavily upon and is guided by contextual factors. This claim is particularly forcefully made by cognitive linguists, who adopt a usage-based approach to language and linguistic meaning (cf. Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 2008).

For instance, when we take into consideration the examples of lexical items that are products of neosemantisat¹ processes such as neologic noun-to-verb conversions, very popular among younger users of English, it is clear that their meaning cannot be deduced solely on the basis of their morphological resemblance to the nominal forms from which they were converted, even though there usually exists more or less close semantic proximity of the nominal and verbal meanings. Consider the following example (after Augustyn, 2013:143):

- (1) One day Jeff woke up and felt totally *porched* by all his friends. They had been *windowing* him for weeks and he couldn't stop them. He knew that eventually the worst would happen... he would be *doored* by all for what they knew of him.
 [to *porch* – to shun someone, to set something temporarily aside]
 [to *window* – to look into someone's life from the outside]
 [to *door* – to permanently exclude someone, to discard something].

This fragment of a spontaneous youth discourse demonstrates eloquently that the proper comprehension of the meaning of neologic conversions requires appropriate specification of the relevant aspects of the context in which a particular novel concept is embedded, which in turn drive the conceptual processes involved in meaning construal.

3. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ANALYSIS OF NOVEL MEANING CONSTRUAL

Drawing on the insights from Cognitive Linguistics (cf., *inter alia*, Langacker, 1987, 2008; Fauconnier, 1997; Augustyn, 2013), it is generally believed that the

¹ For the purpose of this paper I use the notions of *neosemantism* and *neosemantisat* in the similar vein to Herberg and Kinne (1998:1–2) who characterise neosemantisms as lexical units that in a given language had already had an established (conventionalised) meaning, but language users assigned to them a new meaning (cf. also Elsen, 2004:21–23).

whole meaning construction process is anchored in and guided by context. In the process, the interlocutors, a speaker and a hearer, who at the same time are subjects of the conceptualisation, perceive (and produce) sensory stimuli (e.g. acoustic signals, visual stimuli, etc.) of the external world, which, combined with the subjective experience of their introspective view on the world, give rise to mental representations of the world. Those representations constitute parts of the conceptualisers' encyclopaedic knowledge structured by frames, domains, mental spaces, etc. Motivated by language, these representations are then subject to dynamic processing involving basic construal strategies and operations such as profiling or conceptual integration. As a result, meanings are produced, which in turn contribute to and affect language itself, e.g. through meaning extension or language change. This model of language is designed to account for meaning construction, as determined by both linguistic and extralinguistic context. The former relates to language and linguistic knowledge, while the latter encompasses such dimensions as physical context (sensory experience and the interaction between the interlocutors) and knowledge context (cultural, social and encyclopaedic knowledge).

Owing to the fact that the construal of the meaning of a novel expression can hardly be said to be a simple task for an average language user, a comprehensive linguistic analysis of meaning construction of any linguistic utterances, and utterances involving neologic expressions in particular, should be based on conceptual processing of these utterances, since language constitutes but a factor in the whole process of meaning construction. Certainly, language encodes the actual meaning, but does not carry meaning by itself (cf. Turner, 1991:206).

Further, a comprehensive linguistic analysis of meaning construction should take into account the contextual factors in the entirety of their different aspects, including both the purely linguistic as well as the extralinguistic contextual circumstances (i.e. those pertaining to cultural, social or any other specific knowledge) at all levels of their specificity. Second, since each linguistic expression constitutes a situated act of communication between the interlocutors, all aspects of the relation holding between them, such as situational and interpersonal settings as well as physical and subjective experience involved in the construal of a particular linguistic scene, may exert substantial influence on the meaning construction process and thus they are potentially of great importance. In what follows I propose to account for the intricacies of the mental operations and discourse-specific interactions taking place while meaning construction process unfolds in the minds of language users combining the theoretical apparatus elaborated by (i) Vyvyan Evans (2006 and subsequent works) in his *Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models* theory (LCCM), (ii) Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002) in their *Conceptual Blending Theory* (CBT), and (iii) Ronald W. Langacker (2008) in his notion of *Current Discourse Space* (CDS). The insights deriving from these conceptual frameworks correspond to three levels of a comprehensive meaning construction

analysis including (i) the analysis of lexical representations accessed by a particular expression, (ii) cognitive processing of concepts activated in a given utterance, and (iii) interlocutors' interactivity in a particular discourse.

All three cognitive frameworks mentioned here are directly relevant to the ensuing proposal for an integrated model of meaning analysis, however, due to space constraints, only the most important premises of these theories will be discussed below.

3.1. LCCM

The main assumption of LCCM theory is that linguistic and conceptual systems are two different representational systems having distinct and divergent functions. However, the two “interact for purposes of linguistically mediated communication” (Evans, 2009b:2). The linguistic system serves mainly the purpose of communication, while the conceptual system governs different basic cognitive mechanisms and processes such as categorisation, memorising, decision-making, etc.

In Evan's LCCM theory, *semantic structure* – “the primary semantic substrate of the linguistic system” – is modelled “in terms of the theoretical construct of the lexical concept” (Evans, 2010:611). A *lexical concept* is thus a component of linguistic knowledge; in Langacker's (1987, 2008) terms it is the semantic pole of a symbolic unit “which encodes a bundle of various types of highly schematic *linguistic content*” (Evans, 2010:611). In contrast, *conceptual structure* in LCCM theory “the semantic representational substrate of the conceptual system – is modelled by the theoretical construct of the cognitive model” (p. 612). Further, *cognitive model* is understood by Evans as “a coherent body of multimodal knowledge grounded in the brain's modal systems, and derives from the full range of experience types processed by the brain including sensory-motor experience, proprioception and subjective experience including affect” (*ibidem*).

To put differently, while *lexical concepts* (which are purely linguistic in nature) are stored linguistic units, i.e. “conceptual knowledge encoded in a form that can be externalised via language” (Evans, 2007:19), *cognitive models* are conceived of as conceptual non-linguistic knowledge structures, through which lexical concepts gain, directly or indirectly, access to semantic potential, which Evans refers to as *cognitive model profile* (p. 16, 19). Lexical concepts typically facilitate access to a large semantic potential, but only a small part of this semantic potential is usually activated in the interpretation of a particular utterance (Evans 2010:611; also, again, cf. Turner, 1991:206).

According to Evans (2010), a single lexical form², or to use his term, *vehicle* is usually associated with a number of different *lexical concepts*, held to constitute specific semantic contributions encoded in a respective form. Lexical concepts

² Note that according to Evans (2007:21) forms can also refer to “implicit forms” having unresolved phonetic representation such as grammatical constructions.

are vehicle-specific, but not the other way round. Another interesting feature of lexical concepts is that they represent conceptual knowledge in a linguistic form (cf. e.g. Evans, 2009a, 2009b). Thus, from this perspective the meaning of a given utterance arises not in the course of a simple composition of forms (lexical items) comprising this utterance but rather in the process of the integration of lexical concepts associated with these forms.³

Bearing in mind that one form may be associated with different lexical concepts, for the integration of appropriate lexical concepts that will produce meaning, the process of lexical *concepts co-selection* (Evans, 2007:27f.), which is guided by the meaning of the whole utterance, seems to play a particularly important role. From this perspective, it seems plausible to say that it is not the specific form, but rather the lexical concept associated with it that triggers the metonymic shift in meaning of a neosemantism, such as neologic noun-to-verb conversions in example (1).

3.2. CBT

One of the approaches to model linguistic structure in the process of meaning construction is represented by the *Conceptual Blending Theory* as proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (1998 and onwards; cf. also Fauconnier, 1997; Turner and Fauconnier, 2003), a theory which developed out of the theory of mental spaces as postulated by Fauconnier (1985, 1994).

Blending or conceptual integration “is concerned with on-line dynamical cognitive work people do to construct meaning for local purposes of thought and action” (Fauconnier and Turner, 2007:370). Put differently, CBT aims at modeling the dynamic evolution of speakers’ “on-line” representations through creation of networks of connections between mental spaces. One may envisage *mental spaces* as “temporary containers”, evoking relevant information about a particular domain and containing a partial representation of the entities and relations of a given factual or non-factual scenario as construed by a conceptualiser. In the process of conceptual blending, partial structure from two or more mental spaces is dynamically combined, i.e. selectively projected into a blended space.

To account for the dynamic meaning construction process and to explicate the emergent meaning, the CBT model exploits the activation of background knowledge and frequently involves the use of mental imagery and mental simulation (cf. Fauconnier, 1997; Fauconnier and Turner, 2002; Libura, 2010). Nonetheless, the authors of the CBT caution against treating blending as a process generating unified interpretations of particular concepts. Rather, it should be regarded

³ To be precise, following Evans (2006), the meaning of an utterance is constructed in the course of the integration of parts of semantic potentials of lexical concepts activated through cognitive models. However, I defer a detailed discussion of this phenomenon until the next subsection where I deal with meaning construction at the conceptual level.

as a mental operation enabling infinite possibilities of meaning construal and interpretation.

One cannot overlook the obvious similarity between the CBT-based approach to meaning construction and that envisaged by Evans's LCCM theory. Although, both CBT and LCCM theory take different methodological approach to meaning construal, the two accounts appear to offer a number of convergent theoretical solutions. For instance, both agree that meaning construction is a dynamic process and meaning is the property of the conceptual system. Further, in LCCM theory only part of the semantic potential activated for a given lexical concept is actively involved in the process of lexical concepts fusion; similarly, on the CBT-approach not all elements from the input spaces are projected onto the blend. Another convergent aspect is that it is linguistic and extralinguistic context associated with a particular utterance that determines which parts of lexical concepts meaning potential are integrated or which elements from different input spaces are blended together. Conceptual blending allows for back-projection of some parts of the emergent structure from the blended space into the inputs, thus supplementing semantic structure stored by them. Similarly, in LCCM theory, the conception or the meaning associated with a given utterance sanctions the selection of those lexical concepts the integration of which gives rise to this particular meaning.

The crucial difference between Evan's LCCM theory and Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) CBT is that the latter accounts for meaning construction at the conceptual rather than linguistic level. Nevertheless, in the light of the presented arguments, I argue that combining both theories of LCCM and CBT will provide a more detailed and accurate picture of meaning construction process at the level of conceptual representation.⁴

3.3. CDS

Other things being equal, Langacker's (2005, 2008) notion of *Current Discourse Space* may be perceived now as interacting with the theories of LCCM and CBT in that it provides the frame of reference for the process of linguistic and conceptual integration. Since, as both LCCM theory and CBT claim, meaning is a function of a contextualised language use, the CDS, which comprises the usage events, can be held to supplement both theories with the discourse-specific features including the relationship between the interlocutors and with the aspects of discourse dynamicity.

In this model, speaker and hearer, both acting as conceptualisers and belonging to the ground of the ongoing meaning construction process, play a vital role in it, as both construe mental representations of the world on the basis of linguistic

⁴ Evans himself also sees a relation between his LCCM theory and CBT, but argues that LCCM theory models just one specific type of conceptual integration (cf. Evans, 2010:652–654).

expressions used in the discourse. The task of the speaker is to design such a linguistic utterance, i.e. to encode linguistically his or her mental representations of a particular scene in such a way that the speaker is able to decode it properly and conceptually arrive at mental representations as close as possible to those intended by the speaker. However, this task is not simple since mental representations are unstable and depend upon the encyclopaedic knowledge of a relevant conceptualising subject; also the encyclopaedic knowledge which involves conceptualiser's subjective experience of the world will differ from one conceptualiser to the next. Still, as Langacker (2008:466) points out, a substantial overlap of the scene as construed by the speaker and hearer is sufficient to produce a conceptualisation along with the coherent meaning of the linguistic utterance.

Another issue concerns the interactive nature of the communication process. Since expressions deployed by language users comprise usage events, which, according to Langacker, are held to be actions, the expressions can be essentially interpreted as actions as well, or, to be more precise, as the interactions between a speaker/writer and hearer/reader. Conventionally, speakers act as initiators of the communication process, whereas hearers are the addressees of the message conveyed to them by the speaking entity (cf. Langacker, 2005:130). This, however, does not exclude the possibility for a speaker and a hearer to sequentially change their roles making discourse a truly interactive process.

3.4. A proposal for a unified framework for meaning analysis

Based on the foregoing discussion, I present now a diagrammatic proposal for an integrated framework for the analysis of meaning construction process (see Fig. 1.) involving the three levels of dynamic meaning construction mentioned: (i) the analysis of lexical representation of a linguistic utterance, including both compositional analysis of expressions deployed in the utterance and the co-selection of appropriate lexical concepts for these expressions; (ii) the conceptual processing of the meaning potentials activated for the selected lexical concepts, which in the process of conceptual integration produce the utterance meaning; and (iii) the discourse mediation of the conceptual processing of the utterance as attended by both the speaker and the hearer participating in a particular discourse. All the operations constituting the whole meaning construction process unfold simultaneously in the minds of language users, principally at subconscious level of cognition; all of them are context-driven.

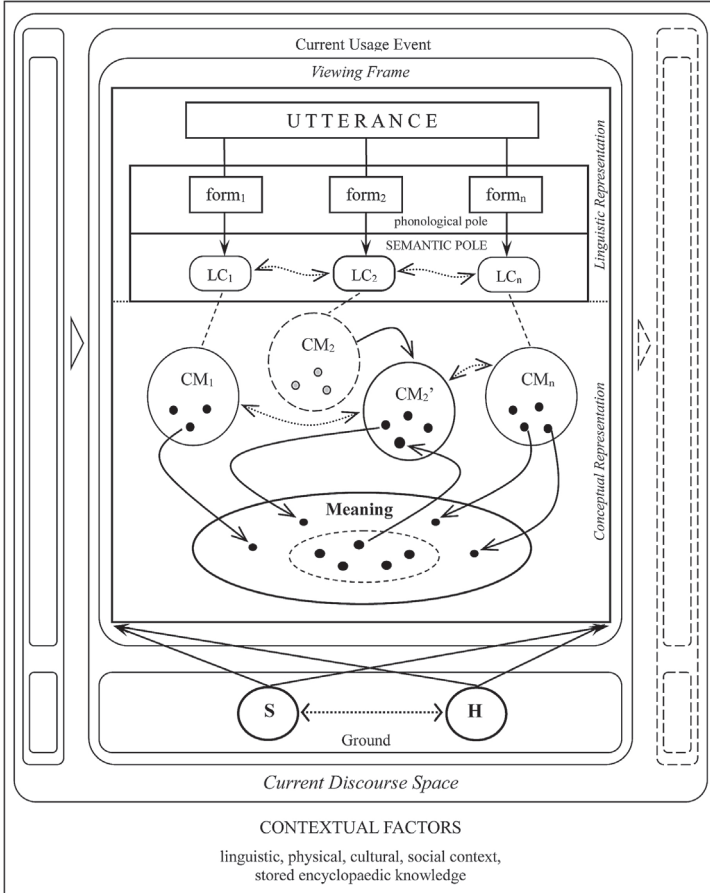


Fig. 1. The proposal for a unified framework for meaning construction analysis

Now consider a practical application of the theoretical framework introduced on the example of adnominal conversions. Converting a noun into a verb involves the integration of an autonomous conceptual entity (THING) with a relational concept (PROCESS). In a previous work (Augustyn 2013), I gathered ample evidence in the form of linguistic data that this type of conceptual integration is pervasive to a great extent in the English language. The fact that nouns may function as verbs in English and that the phenomenon is highly productive in contemporary English may suggest that English speakers have in their language system an entrenched symbolic unit of the type:

Form: ‘SUBJECT + N-V CONV + (OBJECT)’

LC: [AGENT X PERFORMS ACTION Y INVOLVING INSTRUMENT/PATIENT/LOCATION/etc Y]

This lexical concept (LC) is underspecified and has rather a schematic character, while the exact nature of the lexical concept for a given conversion case may differ according to different conversion patterns (cf. Augustyn 2013).

Given that consider a following passage from an interview, in which the interviewer describes a peculiar hotel:

(2) A couple of hours down the Rio Negro, they built a hotel on ropes in the middle of the jungle. The whole structure is suspended since in the rainy season the water rises very high up, which you can see looking at the tree trunks. There are luxurious hotel rooms and a helicopter landing site. The different hotel facilities are connected with suspension rope footbridges and they are the only way to go about the whole complex. The local animals are so tame that we had to watch our caps and camera cases otherwise the monkeys, running around free, would snatch them from us. The hotel is so exclusive that the guest list simply *sunned* me. Only one Pole had stayed there: Roman Polanski.⁵

The ending of the description features a novel use of the verb *to sun*. Let us take a closer look at the very sentence containing this verb: “The hotel is so exclusive that the guest list simply *sunned* me”. To interpret this utterance, six lexical concepts used in this sentence appear to be the most salient and come into foreground: “hotel”, “exclusive”, “guest list”, “sun”, “I/interviewee” and the ditransitive construction “(*hotel’s*) *guest list* caused *me* to receive *Z* by *sunning*”. The difficulty in establishing the meaning of the verb *to sun* relates mostly to the interpretation of the latter construction, since the utterance does not make it explicit what the action of *sunning* actually causes. We must thus resort to meaning potential of the well-entrenched lexical concept associated with the form *sun* which may be largely described as “a star, a source of radiant energy that is usually transmitted in the form of heat and light” (*Collins English Dictionary*). However, at the lexical level neither the immediate environment of the utterance, nor its contextual surrounding invokes any concepts of star-like or energy-emanating entities. Nonetheless, when we consider the semantic potentials of the lexical concepts involved in the utterance in the context of the whole scenario construed, we notice, to use the terms of CBT, certain correspondences between the elements across the activated semantic potentials relating to the different lexical concepts that may be “projected” onto the mental space in which they are blended. For instance, in (2) the following cross-space correspondences may be identified: exclusiveness is associated with stardom, stars (celebrities) are prominent and usually rich persons, these celebrities radiate certain aura of interest, only rich persons may afford a stay at a luxurious place, a hotel described in the text is a highly exclusive place, etc. Then, in the process of conceptual integration of the relevant portions of these semantic

⁵ Fragment of an interview with a Polish pianist and jazz musician Włodzimierz Nahorny, <http://chopin2010.pl/en/interviews/entry/2757-nahorny-chopin-fantazja-polska.html> (access: 31.10.2016).

potentials the meaning of the utterance arises which can be captured as “I was overwhelmed by the exclusiveness of the hotel when I checked its guest list”.

The analysis of the example in (2) reveals that the meaning of the verb *to sun* or even the entire sentence “The hotel is so exclusive that the guest list simply *sunned* me” is, at least partially, dependent upon the discourse configuration set up by the interviewee for the whole interview fragment in (2). In particular, not only the guests who stay at the hotel point to its exclusiveness, but also the uniqueness of the surroundings of the hotel (“a hotel on ropes in the middle of the jungle”) contributes significantly to its exclusiveness. It is clear that the information conveyed in the preceding usage events as well as the anticipation with regard to future usage events (e.g. the interviewer elaborates on the guest list in the next sentence by referring to Roman Polanski as one of the distinguished guests) play an important role in on-line meaning construction.

Finally, consider also the following fragment of a discussion between two Internet forum users:

- (3) [FU 1]: Which free antivirus uses the least system resources? My ancient computer was being paralyzed by AVG [...] Thanks for any suggestions. I know you can run free scans online from bitdefender, but is that enough to do that every few days? I don't go to stupid places online, I hope.

[FU 2]: This. You don't need any. Unless you are going to '*bad boy*' sites and downloading pirated software. Then you are going to get dirty anyway. Otherwise, you don't need any.⁶

The analysis follows the same track as in the previous example, however, here discourse-mediation is put in the foreground. The meaning of the verb *to bad boy* in (3) arises in the communicative interaction between forum user 1 (FU 1) and forum user 2 (FU 2). First, FU1, acting as the speaker, while expressing his main proposition of asking about advice concerning free antivirus software, remarks on the action of “going to stupid places online”. This concept has been picked up by the hearer (FU 2), who after the change of communicative roles, already as the speaker, alludes to the same action, labelling it *bad boying* websites. The fact that FU 2 refers to the previous usage event in the same discursive frame ensures that the hearer (FU 1) understands the concept hidden behind the novel noun-to-verb conversion *to bad boy*, even if he has never heard the term before.

4. CONCLUSION

The arguments adduced in this paper were aimed at demonstrating that LCCM, CBT and CDS provide a semanto-pragmatic interface allowing for

⁶ A fragment of discussion between different forum users excerpted from a thread devoted to antivirus applications, <http://204.74.214.194/forum1/message1126214/pg1> (access: 31.10.2016).

a proper, context-dependent interpretation of the meaning of novel lexical items. The meaning of neosemantic expressions emerges in the broad discourse context, encompassing linguistic, cultural and social knowledge, as a result of the integration of semantic potential of selected lexical concepts and is mediated by speaker-hearer interaction.

In addition, it seems that the discussed analytical framework could also be used to account for meaning construal of linguistic expressions in general, although no such explicit claim is made here at this point, as it would require further investigation into the mechanisms of conceptual and linguistic integration processes involved in meaning construal taking place in the minds of language users.

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STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi głos w dyskusji na temat istoty nowego znaczenia językowego powstającego w procesie konstrukcji znaczenia motywowanego przez warstwę semantyczną języka oraz mentalne reprezentacje przywoływane w trakcie recepcji określonej sceny językowej z uwzględnieniem kontekstu tworzonego i przetwarzanego przez podmiot mówiący i odbiorcę, będących uczestnikami danego dyskursu. Aby wyjaśnić kognitywne mechanizmy konstrukcji znaczenia w umyśle użytkownika języka w artykule zaproponowano odwołanie się do *teorii pojęć leksykalnych i modeli kognitywnych* autorstwa V. Evansa (2009), *teorii amalgamacji konceptualnej* G. Fauconniera i M. Turnera (2009) oraz koncepcji *bieżącej przestrzeni dyskursu* R.W. Langackera (2002). Motywacją stojącą za integracją tych różnych podejść w obrębie semantyki kognitywnej jest próba stworzenia ramowego narzędzia analizy nowych znaczeń z uwzględnieniem trzech poziomów konstrukcji znaczenia: (i) reprezentacji leksykalnej, (ii) przetwarzanie pojęć oraz (iii) interakcji dyskursywnych.

Słowa kluczowe: konstrukcja znaczenia, neosemantyzmy, amalgamacja pojęciowa, pojęcia leksykalne, bieżąca przestrzeń dyskursu

SUMMARY

The paper is meant to be a contribution to the discussion on the nature of novel linguistic meaning arising in the process of meaning construal motivated by both the semantic structure of language and mental representations evoked for a particular linguistic scene, driven by context created and processed by a speaker and hearer participating in a particular discourse. It proposes to account for the mental operations and discourse-specific interactions taking place while meaning construction process unfolds in the minds of language users by resorting to V. Evans's (2009) *Lexical Concepts and Cognitive Models* theory, G. Fauconnier and M. Turner's (2002) *Conceptual Integration Theory*, and R.W. Langacker's (2008) *Current Discourse Space*. The integration of these different approaches within cognitive semantics is an attempt to create a more unified framework for a comprehensive meaning construction analysis of novel expressions involving the three levels of dynamic and context-mediated meaning construal: (i) lexical representation, (ii) conceptual processing, and (iii) discursive interaction.

Keywords: meaning construction, neosemantisms, conceptual blending, lexical concepts, current discourse space