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De-Verbal Nominalisers

In this chapter, I describe the semantics of de-verbal nominalisers. More precisely, I deal with the meanings of morphemes and how they combine to derive nouns. In the course of the investigation, I apply three tenets of Cognitive Semantics to de-verbal nominalisations. To that end, I organise the chapter as follows. In section 2.1, I define a de-verbal suffix and touch on the factors that underlie its integration with a root to form a noun. In section 2.2, I argue that a de-verbal suffix has a wide range of meanings that gather around a central sense. In section 2.3, I argue that the best way to understand nominal suffixes is to group them into domains exhibiting both similarities and differences. In section 2.4, I argue that the difference between a noun pair results from the different ways the speaker describes their common content. To show that the noun pair is not synonymous, I identify the distinctive collocates associated with each member of the pair. To substantiate all the above-mentioned arguments, I rely on actual data offered in the corpus. In section 2.5, I present the key points of the chapter.

2.1 Introduction

A de-verbal suffix is a word-final element that is added to a verb to form a noun. It is a bound morpheme because it never occurs by itself, but is integrated with a free morpheme. When the two morphemes integrate, they show what Langacker (1987: 277–327) calls valence relations.\(^1\) First, the two morphemes are integrated because they have certain elements in common at both semantic and phonological poles. Second, of the two morphemes, the free morpheme qualifies as autonomous, while the bound morpheme qualifies as dependent. Third, the bound morpheme is primarily responsible for the character of the composite structure.
It acts as a profile determinant and has twofold import in the derivation process. As a categorial marker, it changes a lexical item from one class into another. As a meaning marker, it causes a shift of a kind in the semantic structure of the root, and so adds a special meaning to the derived formation. Fourth, the two morphemes form a head-complement structure, with the bound morpheme being the head and the free morpheme being the complement. In some derivational cases, the root undergoes a phonetic change, as in decision from decide, whereas in others it preserves its phonetic shape, as in enrolment from enrol.

2.2 Semantic networks

In this section, I address the question of the category theory in morpholexicology, where it is used to describe the semantic structure of a de-verbal suffix. A de-verbal suffix, I argue, forms a category of distinct but related senses. The distinct senses, which are related by virtue of a semantic network, are the result of dynamic processes of meaning-extensions. The category is characterised by an intersection of properties that make up its members. The member that has the key properties of the category is described as prototypical. It is the sense that comes to mind first or is the easiest to recall. The other members that contain some, but not all, of the properties are described as peripheral. The peripheral senses inherit the specifications of the category, but flesh out the category in contrasting ways. The senses of a category are related to each other like the members of a family, where they share some general properties but differ in specific details. Category is a cognitive ability which reveals the general properties of structures of a given kind via their relationships with one another.

To show how the polysemy of a de-verbal suffix is accounted for in a principled manner, I need to consider the cognitive model of transitivity. The model is scalar in dimension in that it subsumes other components. Let me demonstrate the model by giving an example of the suffix -ion. Prototypically, the suffix -ion combines with a root to mean action. The action can vary in terms of transitivity. In the prototypical sense, the suffix is attached to transitive roots to form nouns, as in inspection. One step removed from the prototype is the case where the suffix is attached to (in)transitive roots, as in reduction. A further step removed from the prototype is the case where the suffix is attached to intransitive roots, as in eruption. Peripherally, the suffix -ion combines with a root to mean result. The result can vary relative to the type of entity affected. In some cases, the entity affected by the action is human, as in