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THE BORDERLINE AREA BETWEEN ZEUGMA AND NORMAL USAGE

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1. LEXICAL IDENTITY AND CONCEPTUAL CONTRAST

Native speakers of English tend to agree that (1) is a clear case of zeugma, that (2) is a lot less disturbing, and that (3) is quite acceptable.¹

(1) I washed the floor and myself.
(2) I washed the floor and I washed myself.
(3) I washed the floor and I washed the linen.

If the lexical meaning of the verb wash is something like “make clean,” we should not really be surprised to find that people accept not only (3) but also (2), but how are we to explain the fact that it is much harder to accept (1), except as a deliberate instance of zeugma, presumably to achieve a humorous effect? Well, we have no problem understanding why a single verb form washed with two coordinate direct object arguments, one referring to an inanimate entity, a floor, and one to the individual referentially bound by the first-person subject pronoun, leads to what most language users judge to be a semantic incongruity. The two noun phrases the floor and myself in (1) are

¹ Zeugma (“yoke” in Greek) is a figure of speech describing the joining of two or more parts of a sentence with a single common verb or noun. In the modern sense, zeugma is normally used in a narrower sense, corresponding to what used to be called syllepsis. In syllepsis the clauses or phrases are not parallel in meaning. This creates a semantic incongruity that is often exploited for a humorous effect. A typical example would be something like this (from the TV programme Star Trek: The Next Generation): “You are free to execute your laws, and your citizens, as you see fit.” – Wikipedia.
conjoined immediate constituents of the larger direct object of the transitive verb form. This is a grammatical construction that gives the hearer the procedural information (Blakemore, 1987; Wilson and Sperber, 1993) that the speaker is presenting the meaning of the verb, here wash, as the same whether we apply it to “washing a floor” or “washing a human body.” At the same time it is a construction that will sensitize the addressee to any deviation from the rule-governed assumption that there should be no conceptual difference between the two kinds of “washing,” and indeed, there is a noticeable deviation from normal language use here, because we may feel intuitively that there is no more than a tenuous conceptual link between the two kinds of washing activity.

If native speakers unanimously react negatively to a linguistic form like (1) above because of what strikes them as a zeugma effect, we may conclude that there is a conceptual incompatibility between two lexically determined polysemous meanings of the lexical item wash. The alternative theoretical position is that the verb wash has a univocal lexical meaning but either the context of utterance or the semantics of the direct object argument will cause the hearer to adjust a truth-conditionally underdetermined lexical meaning so that the communicated concepts will differ even if the lexical verb is one and the same. Zeugma has been recognized as a test for polysemy. However, it is hardly an infallible test, because it ultimately depends on speakers’ personal judgments about semantic relatedness or resemblance.

Many linguists would endorse the view that de-accentuation of a lexical item in an utterance signals that the item represents a discourse-given concept, but what exactly does this mean? When asked to produce utterances of (2) and (3) without being informed of stipulated contextual premises of any sort, speakers of English will typically de-stress not only the second but even the first of the two tokens of the verb form washed in the respective conjunct clauses. Does this warrant the conclusion that the speaker feels the utterance fits into a discourse in which there has already been a reference to acts of washing, so that the speaker of (2)/(3) is answering a question about what physical objects were washed? No, in actual fact de-accentuation of the verb in an English phrase made up of a transitive verb and a direct object nominal is a common feature even if the verb does not represent a discourse-given concept. I had eight native speakers of English produce an utterance of the sentence written in (4) without offering them any contextual constraints. Four of them let the noun rosebush be the first item with a pitch-accent on it, while the other four gave a pitch-accent to the verb form planted as well.

(4) They planted a rosebush outside John’s bedroom.

And the tendency for a speaker of English to de-accent both of the identical verb forms in the respective conjunct clauses in (5) is no proof of a semantic uniformity or of inherent polysemy in a single lexical verb plant.

(5) They planted a rosebush outside John’s bedroom and they planted a bomb inside it.