

Norms and Exploitations: a ‘double-helix’ theory of language

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Large-scale corpus-driven lexical analysis leads to two apparently contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, the regularities of word use (valencies, collocations) are more regular than most pre-corpus linguists would have predicted. On the other hand, the irregularities are more irregular. This paradox can be accounted for by a theory of language as rule-governed behaviour—however, it needs not just one set of rules, but rather two interactive rule systems. On the one hand, there are rules governing uses of words in accordance with normal patterns. On the other hand, there are rules governing the idiomatic exploitation of normal patterns in anomalous arguments, ellipsis, novel metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech. This ‘double helix’ rule system is called the Theory of Norms and Exploitations (TNE). It is TNE that enables creative use of language when speakers and writers make new meanings, while at the same time relying on a core of shared conventions for mutual understanding. TNE also accounts for a large percentage of linguistic change (changes in word meaning and addition of secondary ‘word meanings’). The boundary between ‘norm’ and ‘exploitation’ is not sharp, but fuzzy: a large grey area on a cline between two polarities.

Strictly speaking, it must be said that words in isolation do not have meanings. Meanings are events, generated by use or exploitation of established patterns, in a Gricean model, through interaction between speaker and hearer—or (with some displacement in time) between writer and reader. Words in isolation have **meaning potentials**—a cluster or more or less vague and unstructured semantic components, selections from which are activated only when a word is used. The ‘definitions’ in monolingual dictionaries are statements of meaning potentials, not of meanings.

In this presentation, I discuss some of corpus evidence that has motivated this theory. I illustrate the tension between the ‘phraseological tendency’ and the ‘terminological tendency’ (Sinclair 1991). I will also present a new resource (work in progress) that is a practical application based on the theory: the *Pattern Dictionary of English Verbs* (PDEV; see <http://nlp.fi.muni.cz/projects/cpa/>). Finally, if time allows, I will compare PDEV with FrameNet (the two resources are complementary).