Chapter 5

Semantic Conflict and Resolution

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter concerns the regular linguistic situation in which a portion of discourse received by an addressee provides two or more specifications for the same referent.[1] These specifications can be in accord or in conflict. In the latter case, a range of cognitive operations for resolution of the conflict can come into play in the addressee.

More specifically, the term **multiple specification** is applied to the situation where a sentence, or other portion of discourse, provides two or more specifications of the characteristics of the same referent. We mainly treat the case where two such specifications are made by a closed-class form and an open-class form in a sentence. But we will also consider cases in which they are made by two closed-class forms, by two open-class forms, or by one of these and the overall reference of the whole sentence. In all these cases, both of the forms specify values for a single parameter, or property of the referent. The possibilities for either compatibility or conflict thus exist for the different specifications. In this latter case of **semantic conflict**, various processes of conceptual reconciliation can come into play in an addressee under a general cognitive procedure of **semantic resolution**.

Though there are many more, we will look at five of these processes here. One process involves a "shift" in one specification of one of the forms that brings it into accord with the other form (section 2). Another process involves a "blend" of the two specifications of both the forms (section 3). A third process involves the "juxtaposition" of the two specifications (section 4). In a fourth process, the two specifications are not obviously reconcilable and so are "juggled" to find their best fit, while in a fifth process, the two specifications are so incompatible that any resolution

is "blocked" (section 5). One of the resolution processes, that of shift, crucially involves the concept of linguistic basicness, and this concept will be discussed in section 6. It is assumed that any particular conflicting specifications do not necessarily admit to only one of the resolution processes, but rather that an addressee can in general apply any of a range of alternative processes.

This chapter forms a pair with the chapter that follows. That chapter, II-6, concerns the online cognitive processing that takes place in the producer of a discourse to resolve the conflicts among competing communicative goals and available expressive means for the representation of a concept. In a complementary way, the present chapter concerns the online cognitive processing that takes place in the recipient of such a discourse to resolve the conflicts among competing representations of a concept.

2 SHIFTS

When the specifications of two forms in a sentence are in conflict, one kind of reconciliation is for the specification of one of the forms to change so as to come into accord with the other form. This change type of accommodation is termed a **shift**. Several types of shifts are sketched below. In the first two types, a closed-class form exhibits the shift. Here, a component of the basic schema represented by the closed-class form either stretches or is canceled. Such shifts bring the closed-class specification into accord either with the specifications of an accompanying open-class form or with the referent context. The third type of shift is by far the commonest. In it, a basic specification of an open-class form is replaced so that it comes into accord with the specification of an accompanying closed-class form.

2.1 Stretching of a Component of a Closed-Class Schema

The schema represented by the closed-class English preposition *across* has a feature pertaining to the relative lengths of two linear elements. Specifically, this preposition requires that the length of the Figure's path be the same or less than the length of the axis of the Ground object perpendicular to that path. Thus, if I walk *across* a pier having distinct width and length axes, I must traverse the width axis of the pier, because then my path is shorter than the axis of the pier running perpendicularly to my path, namely, its length axis. If I did traverse the length axis, my path would be much longer than the now perpendicular width axis, and in fact *across* could not be used. Rather, the case where the path is longer than

the perpendicular axis generally falls into the schematic venue of the preposition *along*, so that I might now say that I was walking *along* the pier.

But now consider the use of *across* with a certain succession of Ground objects. In this succession, the axis of the Ground object that the figure traverses progresses by stages from being shorter to being longer than the Ground axis perpendicular to it, as illustrated in (1).

(1) I swam/walked across the
   a. river.
   b. square field.
   c. ?rectangular swimming pool.
   d. *pier.
   ⟨where my path is from one narrow end to the other of the pool/pier⟩

The partial acceptability of (1c), for which the path is only moderately longer than the perpendicular axis, suggests that the 'relative length' feature of the *across* schema permits some "stretching" of its basic specification. But the unacceptability of (1d) shows that it cannot be stretched too far.

2.2 Cancelation of a Component of a Closed-Class Schema

To take the *across* schema again, it can be considered to include as a basic feature the following relationship between the Figure's path and the Ground's planar geometry: The Figure's path begins at one edge, lies on the surface, and ends at the farther edge of the Ground's bounded plane. This feature is present in the usual understanding of sentences like *The shopping cart rolled across the street* and *The tumbleweed rolled across the field in one hour*. But one or more components of this schematic feature can be suspended or canceled when they conflict with other specifications in the sentence. Such specifications can either be supplied by particular lexical forms or by the overall reference of the sentence.

Thus, in (2), the overall reference of the sentence makes it clear that the cart did not make it all the way to the other side of the street. Accordingly, there is a suspension or cancelation of one component of the cited *across* feature, namely, the final component: '[the Figure's path] ends at the farther edge'. The noteworthy linguistic principle in operation here is that a word—here, *across*—does not have to be dropped just because its basic referent does not perfectly fit the context. Rather, it can continue in

use with most of its specifications still intact but made serviceable again by cognitive processes that shift just one or a few of its specifications.

(2) The shopping cart rolled across the street and was hit by an oncoming car.

Comparably in (3), the double-boundedness of the *across* schema conflicts with the open-endedness indicated by other elements of the sentence. In particular, this open-endedness is indicated by the *for* of *for one hour* (by contrast with *in*) together with the fact that a prairie's great size places its boundaries outside of a tumbleweed's hour-long trek. Accordingly, there is a cancelation of the first and last components of the cited *across* feature, namely, of the components 'begins at one edge' and 'ends at the farther edge'.

(3) The tumbleweed rolled across the prairie for an hour.

2.3 Replacement of a Component of an Open-Class Specification

Together with its more contentful specifications, an open-class form often includes certain structural specifications of the kind principally represented by closed-class forms. Such structural specifications can conflict in a sentence with those of an accompanying closed-class form. In that case, the open-class form usually replaces its original structural specifications with the specifications of the closed-class form. In this way, the two forms come into semantic accord. This process is exemplified below for two different categories of specifications.

2.3.1 Extension and Distribution Both closed-class forms and open-class forms can make specifications as to a quantity's "degree of extension" or its "pattern of distribution"—two conceptual categories that were discussed in sections 4.5 and 4.6 in chapter I-1. To consider degree of extension just for the temporal domain, an event can be "point durational" (idealizable as occurring at only a point of time), or "extent durational" (occurring over an extent of time). And as to its pattern of distribution, an event can, for instance, be "one-way" if it involves a transition from one condition to another without a return, or can be "full-cycle" if it does include such a return.

Now, the open-class verb *hit* may be taken to refer most basically to a point-durational full-cycle action that involves a (propelled) object sailing toward another object, impacting with it, and rebounding. In (4a), these

basic temporal specifications are consonant with the closed-class forms. Thus, the point duration of *hit* is consonant with the *at* temporal phrase, as well as with the *and ... again* construction. The fact that a clause like *removed the mallet from the gong* cannot be felicitously included indicates that *hit* is understood here as already being full-cycle, hence as already covering the moving object's departure from the impacted object. By contrast, the sentence in (4b)—which in one reading might be uttered while watching a slow-motion film of the event—has a closed-class form, the progressive construction *be -ing*, whose 'extent-durational' and 'one-way' reading is in conflict with the original temporal structure of *hit*. This latter, accordingly, here shifts into accord with the closed-class specification. In particular, the verb replaces its point-durational extension with an extent-durational extension, and its full-cycle pattern with a one-way pattern. The verb now refers to an extent-durational one-way action that involves a (propelled) object sailing toward an object on a trajectory that will likely lead to its impact with it.

(4) a. She hit the gong with the mallet at exactly 3:00, (*removed the mallet from the gong,) and hit it again five seconds later.
b. And now she's hitting the gong with the mallet.

2.3.2 Associated Attributes A survey of comfortably reading sentences with intransitive *bend* as the verb and various nominals as subject—(5) is an example—would show the nominals' referents to be, grosso modo, linear or planar stiff objects. It can be concluded that the verb *bend* itself makes this specification about the character of the involved object, in addition to the specifications that the verb makes as to the action the object undergoes. This object thus has characteristics specified for it by two open-class forms, the subject nominal and the verb. This is therefore a case of multiple specification.

(5) a. The cardboard bent in two.
b. The handkerchief bent in two.

However, consider the sentence in (5b) and what an addressee's sequence of responses to it might be. The sentence contains a specificational clash: a 'handkerchief' is normally soft, but 'bending' is normally done by something stiff, characteristics mutually incompatible for a single object. An addressee's initial reaction may indeed involve surprise or perplexity, affect often attendant on cognitive incongruity. This may be succeeded,

though, by a conceptual resolution. This resolution could involve a blend or juxtaposition of the two specifications (see below). Or it could involve the imagining of some such circumstance as the handkerchief's having previously been dipped into liquid nitrogen. This last form of resolution —in which, as here, an addressee comes up with a context that eliminates the prior incongruity—involves a shift. The attribute of 'softness' normally associated with a 'handkerchief' is replaced by 'stiffness' and thus comes to be in accord with the verb's specification thereof. The cognitive parameter involved here is that of **associated attributes**—the incidental attributes typically associated with one's concept of some entity. Though not discussed further here, more investigation will be needed into the so-conceivedly essential versus incidental characteristics of an entity—along the lines of Fillmore's (1975) analysis of forms like *real/fake gun, real/imitation coffee.*

Here are two further examples of shift with respect to associated attributes. In (6), *home* functions as a closed-class form, specifically as a verb satellite (see chapter II-1), specifying a combination of Path plus Ground-object, in particular 'to one's/ . . . home'. The Ground-object is specified as well by the open-class prepositional object in (a) and (b). In the former case, the double specification is harmonious in terms of normal expectations. But in the latter case, the two specifications are in conflict. A 'hotel room' usually suggests a 'temporary guest lodging', whereas a 'home' usually suggests a 'permanent residence'. One resolution that an addressee could make here, though, is to shift the associated attribute of the open-class form, *hotel room*, to that of the closed-class form *home*. Thus, finally, the place that John goes to is understood both as his home and as a hotel room, where the latter is apparently used for long-term dwelling.

(6) John went home
  a. to his cottage in the suburbs.
  b. to his hotel room.

Comparably, the two alternatives in (7) respectively exhibit concord and conflict between a closed-class specification and an open-class specification with respect to associated attributes. The closed-class form here, a construction that could be called one of "counterpart matching," indicates that the time of day expressed at the end of the sentence is to be understood as being 'on time'. The actual time expression is an open-class form. The 9:00 of (7a) has the associated attribute in this society of

being 'on time' for the start of a usual workday. But the *noon* of (7b) would normally be taken as late. This latter attribute is therefore in conflict with the constructional indication. An addressee might at first experience surprise or puzzlement on hearing *noon*, but might then shift its associated attribute of being 'late' to one of being 'on time' by imagining some unusual job situation that begins its day at noon. Once again, then, the open-class form will have shifted so as to accommodate the closed-class form through a process of replacing one of its associated attributes.

(7) Jane got to work late, and Bill didn't get there at
a. 9:00,
b. noon,
either.

3 BLENDS

Where two specifications are disconsonant, a shift brings about a semantic resolution by altering one of the specifications so that it comes into accord with the other. But an alternative cognitive process is a **blend**. Here, the addressee comes up with an amplified cognitive representation that can accommodate both of the specifications. Typically, this representation is an imaginative hybrid that the addressee herself might consider not to correspond to her more objective representations. Thus, in a blend, both of the original specifications are retained in some form. We consider two types of blends, "superimposition" and "introjection."

3.1 Superimposition

Consider the sentence in (8).

(8) My sister wafted through the party.

There is a conflict here between two sets of specifications. On the one hand, the verb *waft* suggests a perhaps leaflike object moving gently to and fro in an irregular pattern through the air. On the other hand, the remaining forms in the sentence specify a person (moving) through a group of other people. These two sets of specifications are apparently too disparate to be reconciled through a shift-type process, as in the "bent handkerchief" example above. Thus, there is no obvious context in which a woman could be a leaf, or a leaf a woman, nor is there one in which a party could be the wind, or the wind a party. Nevertheless, this disparity does not cause any blockage to further conceptual processing. Rather, a

conceptual blend or hybrid that is compounded out of the two sets of specified characteristics becomes evoked in the addressee. To me, for example, the sentence evokes the conceptualization of my sister wandering aimlessly through the party, somewhat unconscious of the events around her, and of the party somehow suffused with a slight rushing sound of air. There is, however, some structure to this blend. Of the two sets of specifications, it is my sister walking through the party that emerges as the essential referent of the sentence, while that of something leaflike wafting through air winds up functioning solely as a kind of suggestive coloration that gets blended into the essential referent. The two sets of specifications can be aligned part for part as in (9). Here, the elements actually appearing in the sentence are lowercase, while the suggested elements are in capitals. Still, it is the elements of (9b), both explicit and implicit, that are understood as the essential referent. But the fact that the tinge-imbuing elements of (9a) can be aligned with the essential elements suggests the term **superimposition** for this type of blend.

(9) a. THE LEAF wafted through THE AIR.
b. My sister WALKED through the party.

The prototype circumstance to which the traditional notion of "metaphor" has been applied is indeed this one of a superimposed blend. But it should be kept in mind that—in the terms of this chapter's analytic framework—such metaphor is only one subtype of a much more general process of resolution of conflict between multiple specifications.

3.2 Introjection

Assume that the two sentences in (10) are descriptions of scenes to be filmed. If the actors are dressed in a nondistinguishing way, a shot could be taken that would look the same for both scenes, one consisting of a hand patting a knee. At least to this extent, accordingly the presence of the reflexive pronoun in (10b) does not alter the basics of the action specified. It merely indicates that of the two impacting objects specified in both scenes, the hand and the knee, both are parts of the same body rather than of two different bodies.

(10) a. As the soldier and the sailor sat talking, the soldier patted the sailor on the knee.
b. As the soldier and the sailor sat talking, the soldier patted himself on the knee.

But no single camera shot could be found for scenes acted according to the two sentences of (11). The sentence of (11a) involves two people, one of whom lifts and throws the other one forth while himself remaining in place. But the sentence in (11b) involves one person who springs forth. And the movements of this single person in the latter scene do not resemble the movements of either of the persons in the former scene. The presence of the reflexive pronoun in (11b) has this time altered the nature of the action considerably. It seems, in fact, to have altered it in the direction of the action specified by *jump*. Thus, if we were now to film scenes on the basis of (11b) and (11c), we would find the results indistinguishable.

(11) As a military training exercise,
  a. the soldier threw the sailor off the cliff into the ocean below.
  b. the soldier threw himself off the cliff into the ocean below.
  c. the soldier jumped off the cliff into the ocean below.

The conceptual category involved here can be called that of **scene partitioning**. In its basic reference, the open-class verb *throw* specifies a dyadic scene partitioning—that is, one with two major role-playing entities, a 'thrower' and a 'thrown object'. In (11a), this dyadic specification of *throw* is consonant with the occurrence of the two distinct referents specified by the subject and the object nominals. But in (11b), this dyadic verb occurs together with a monadic closed-class form, the construction of subject + reflexive, which specifies just a single referent. Thus, there is a semantic clash between the dyadic specification of the open-class verb *throw* and the monadic specification of the closed-class reflexive construction.

Now, at least one type of semantic resolution takes place here, that of a shift. The dyadic specification of *throw* gives way to the monadic specification of the reflexive, so that the sentence overall now unmistakably refers to just a single referent entity. But the cognitive matter does not appear to rest there. If such a cognitive shift were all that takes place, the newly monadic sentence of (11b) ought to be semantically indistinguishable from the basically monadic sentence of (11c) with respect to the issue of scene partitioning. But for all the cinematic equivalence of the two sentences, they still seem to evoke different cognitive representations. In contrast with (11c), (11b) seems still to be specifying some form of two-roledness—one, in fact, somehow blended in with a basically one-roled occurrence. Such a form of two-into-one blend may accordingly be termed **introjection**. To me, in particular, the sentence in (11b) evokes a

sense that the single personhood of the soldier is somehow subdivided into two fractions: His will, jumping musculature, and force exertion is somehow sensed as a thrower, while the rest of his personality and body is sensed as the thrown object.

All the same conclusions seem to hold for the example in (12). The two roles, 'host' and 'guest,' of the basically dyadic social scene specified by *serve* in (12a) are compressed and superimposed on—that is, introjected into—the single actor of (12b). These metaphorically blended-in attributes are all that distinguish the scene here from the cinematically identical scene of (12c).[2]

(12) a. The host served me some dessert from the kitchen.
b. I served myself some dessert from the kitchen.
c. I went and got some dessert from the kitchen.

4 JUXTAPOSITIONS

Where two sentence specifications are in conflict, the cognitive process of **juxtaposition** places them side by side for simultaneous consideration within a larger cognitive context. In the cognitive process of blending just discussed, the specificational inputs to the blend seem in general to lose their original individuality in the new conceptual hybrid that emerges. And the semantic conflict that the separate specifications originally represented disappears within the new imaginative blend. But under juxtaposition, the original specifications retain their individuality as well as the conceptual conflict they produce together. In fact, the point of juxtaposition is precisely to foreground or employ this conflict. In particular, the process of juxtaposition draws a perimeter around the disparate specifications and establishes a higher-level perspective point from which to direct attention over them all at once. This attention over incompatible specifications generates the experience of what can be called **incongruity effects**. Included among such effects are surprise, oddity, irony, and humor. We present several instances of the humor type of incongruity to exemplify the process of juxtaposition.

Consider the sentence in (13). There is here a specificational conflict between two of the words: *slightly* indicates a point along a gradient, while *pregnant* has the sense of 'all or none' as a basic structural component. One type of resolution that an addressee might effect on this conflict is a shift. He could alter the 'all or none' component of *pregnant* to one of gradience, so that the resulting reference is now to a stage of gestation.

Alternatively, though, he could employ the process of juxtaposition to comical effect. In particular, the categorical fact of pregnancy appears to be understood as having a negative association that the speaker attempts to underplay by suggesting that the woman has only a modest case of it.

(13) She's slightly pregnant.

A juxtaposition can also be made across two sentences, like those of the interchange in (14). Here, person A's remark would normally be understood with a sense of introjection, as this was discussed in the preceding section. That is, the sentence refers to a single person, but a person into whom is metaphorically blended the suggestion of a dyad. But now a person B might respond as in (14b), using an expression that refers to a plurality of distinct individuals. The effect of this second utterance is to raise the dyadic coloration of the first remark to a suggested level of actuality, to be placed in attention beside the already cognized monadic actuality. The effect is comic absurdity.

(14) A: John likes himself.
B: Yes, well, birds of a feather flock together.

Incongruous juxtapositions can be made not only of words and expressions, but also of stylistics and delivery. For example, the phraseology of the street person quoted in (15) manifests a semantic and grammatical complexity that suggest an educated articulateness. But the delivery suggests a streetworn nonchalance. The two sets of traits considered together can give a comically inconsistent impression of the speaker's character.

(15) You couldn't help us out with any part of 22 cents . . . ?
(spoken with a monotoned rapid slur)

5 JUGGLING AND BLOCKING

On hearing a portion of discourse with conflicting specifications, an addressee might be able to apply one of the preceding types of semantic resolution so quickly and automatically that the cognitive processes involved would normally be difficult to access consciously. But some cases of conflict seem to be novel or problematic enough that an addressee must proceed through a succession of attempts at resolution that can more readily become conscious.

One form of such a succession of attempts can be called **schema juggling**. Consider the sentence in (16). The problem here is that the *across*

schema, which prototypically refers to a straight path between two parallel boundaries, cannot obviously be matched to any contextually relevant portion of the complex geometry of a car. Respondents to whom I have uttered this sentence generally report that they quickly go through several ways to place an 'across' path on a car so as to end up with the least poor fit, and that they were readily able to bring this succession into awareness once asked about it.

(16) The snail crawled across the car.

We might note that the respondents' final solutions were varied. Some had the snail crawling over the roof of the car from one side to the other. The difficulty with this solution is that the path is curved and on top—properties better suited to the preposition *over* than to *across*. Some respondents had the snail crawling over the hood of the car from one side to the other. This solution improves over the roof solution in that the path is mid-height and perhaps not so curved, but it has the disadvantage of being located at a peripheral part of the car rather than at the central body of the car. One respondent had the snail crawling in through one open back window, along the back seat, and out the window on the other side. The advantages of this solution are that the path is central and flat, but the disadvantage is that it is interior, hence, better suited to the preposition *through*.

Finally, some cases of discrepancy between two specifications might strike the linguistic faculty of an addressee in such a way that it does not come up with any resolution. In such cases, one may speak of **blockage**. Consider, for example, the sentence in (17). Here, the disparity is between the schema of the preposition *through*, in which the path occurs within a three-dimensional surrounding medium, and the fact that *plateau*, especially in conjunction with *walk*, suggests a two-dimensional top planar surface. If the addressee cannot find a way to shift, blend, or juxtapose these two schematic specifications, she may simply leave the utterance as is, unable to semantically process it further. This would then not be an instance of semantic resolution at all, but rather a form of nonresolution.

(17) *Jane walked through the plateau.

6 THE CONCEPT OF BASICNESS IN SEMANTIC RESOLUTION

One of the processes of semantic resolution—that of shift—criterially depends on the concept of "basicness." Without that concept, another cognitive process would have to be invoked, that of "selection."

Central to the concept of basicness is that of the forms that make up some set, one of those forms is privileged, and that the remaining forms represent a deviation from the privileged one. The concept of privilege has variations, such as that the privileged form is the original one, the commonest one, the structurally simplest one, or the most independent one. And the concept of deviation from the basic can involve an actual change through time from the basic as starting point, or some more static sense of abstract divergence. This concept of a domain's organization can be called the **basic-divergent** model. Many theoretical formulations in linguistics have been based on this model. They include the concepts of word derivation, markedness theory, transformational grammar, prototype theory, and metaphoric mapping.

The main alternative concept of organization of a domain can be called the **even-array** model (see Hockett's (1954) "item and process" model and "item and arrangement" model, respectively). The even-array model is a static form of organization in which the forms of a domain are understood as conjunctions of properties having equal privilege, and/or in which the components of an expression are taken to be simultaneously co-present in a static pattern of interrelationships. Theoretical formulations in linguistics that have been based on this model include paradigms, monostratal grammars, and polysemy (without radiality).

Of these two models, the basic-divergent model is relevant here because only by having the concept that a linguistic form can have a basic meaning can a process of shift be conceived to operate on it to alter that meaning to some nonbasic meaning. Thus, this chapter's original examples with *across* were based on the proposition that this preposition has a basic meaning. Specifically, this basic meaning includes the conditions that the Figure's path fully traverses one axis of the Ground object and that it is not longer than the transverse axis of that object. Accordingly, the cases in which *across* held other meanings were considered to result by processes of deviation from the basic meaning, specifically, by the processes of stretching and cancelation. Under the even-array model, though, these various senses of *across* would all be held to be of equal status, simply alternatives selected from a polysemous range. No process of shift—that is, of alteration—would have taken place, but simply a process of selection.

Notes

1. This chapter is a much-redone version of Talmy 1977. Many portions of that original paper presented in their earliest form some of the ideas that now appear in

chapter I-1 in a more developed form. To avoid repetition, those portions of the original paper have been omitted here. The remainder of the original paper dealt with semantic conflict and processes for its resolution. That portion, moderately revised and expanded, is what appears here. One of the types of semantic resolution treated in the original paper (as well as here), that of "shifts," bears much resemblance to Pustejovsky's (1993) concept of "coercion," while another of the types, that of "blends," bears much resemblance to Fauconnier and Turner's (1998) concept by the same name of "blends."

2. The unusual sentence in (i) shows that not all sensible introjections have become standardized.

(i) ?I'll drop myself off and then let *you* have the car.