# Core, subsense and the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (NODE). On how meanings hang together, and not separately

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> 'The theoretical linguist may decline to lay down a determinate number of meanings for one polysemous word, or to prescribe a definitive method for doing so, but this theoretical omission is unavailable to the methodologically and practically constrained lexicographer. He cannot avoid making definite decisions, which will determine the number and the structure of his entries' [Robins 1987, 54]

**Abstract**

The *New Oxford English Dictionary* [NODE, 1998] tries to describe meaning in a way which shows how the various meanings of a word are related. It tries to do so by distinguishing core senses and subsenses, derived from the core senses. Modern layout techniques are used to highlight the various senses. This paper intends to examine what NODE is in fact attempting and how well it has succeeded. Particular attention is paid to the treatment of figurative use. The conclusion is that NODE's laudable aims do not quite square with its practice.

## 1 Introduction

As we have in recent years been made very much aware, metaphors are all around us. We in fact live by them [Lakoff/Johnson 1980, Lakoff/Turner 1989] and also die by them [Bultinck 1998]. The literature on metaphor and figurative language in gene in general is vast and expanding almost daily. We have come to realise that far from being the exclusive province of poets, metaphor is like the oxygen we breathe: without it we would hardly be able to communicate effectively. It is, consequently, small wonder that this phenomenon in some way or other also looms large in dictionaries, since it is here that the meaning and use of words and multi-word units is described. In three recent papers [van der Meer 1996b, van der Meer 1997, van der Meer 1999] I have drawn attention to the fact that especially the major English learner's dictionaries frequently fail in their task of alerting the foreign user to the full semantic picture of words, in that they often first define the figurative meanings of words - without indicating that they *are* figurative – and only then the more basic meaning(s). The reason for this procedure is clearly the belief that the most frequently occurring sense – the one most likely to be looked up - should come first, and it so happens that in many cases the figurative senses are more common. However,

> [i]n the case of numerous words the non-figurative sense is still there as a synchronic fact, enriching the figurative use with a 'by-way-of-speaking' dimension.

> This is, in fact, a precondition for the figurative use to be called such at all ('figurative use' always means that there is a 'literal' use as well). To mention an example: in CC *flak* is defined as severe criticism only, which in effect means that this use has been stripped of its figurative, by-way-of-speaking overtones. To all intents and purposes the same holds for CIDE, which gives *flak* ('OPPOSITION') and *flak* ('FIRING OF GUNS') two separ two separate 'guidewords', thus creating an impression that the two meanings are semantically unrelated. The CIDE treatment of *flak* does not differ from that of real homonyms like *bud* 'PLANT PART' and *bud* 'MAN', or homonyms like *bear* ANIMAL and *bear* CARRY (also cf. CIDE viii). In OALD, which still recognises a literal meaning, this comes first, whereas LDOCE defines the figurative sense first. Here we have the problem in a nutshell (itself another word where treatment in the four dictionaries differs!): is the literal sense relevant - to the (foreign) learners - and, if so, how should the literal and figurative senses be *defined*, *linked* and *presented*? [van der Meer 1997, 556-7] (cf. bibliography for abbreviations).

I could add that learners should not only be made aware of the particular meaning they happen to be looking up, but that dictionaries may also in addition be expected to have some responsibility in the field of vocabulary development [Scholfield 1999]: learners/users should be enabled to understand that meanings quite often hang together, that in fact the notion of various *separate* senses for one word is quite frequently a delusion, to a large extent inculcated by the numbering found in many dictionaries. More specifically, the full force and implications of the figurative 'senses' will only be understood by reference to the basic, literal, meaning. Thus, we read in CC: '1 If you **defuse** a dangerous or tense situation, you calm it. 2 If someone **defuses** a bomb, they remove the fuse from it so that it cannot explode'. In my view *defuse* simply cannot be used to say that you *calm* a dangerous or tense situation,[1] but it is used to express that you remove the possible cause for such situations 'blowing up', 'exploding', i.e. getting out of hand, and it is hence the defusing which removes the explosive material (the fuse), figuratively speaking[van der Meer 1997, 562]. For this reason I devised the following model definition:

> **DEFUSE**: When someone **defuses** a bomb, they take away or destroy the device (the FUSE) that makes it explode (*illustrative example(s)*). When someone **defuses** situations or sentiments that are viewed as bomb-like in that they too are dangerous ('explosive'), such as *criticism, disputes, danger, threats, arguments, anger*, it means that they take away the immediate cause of the danger (*illustrative example(s)*) [idem, p. 567].

In this way the user/learner cannot ignore the fact that these two meanings hang together and that the metaphorical meaning is 'by-way-of-speaking'.

In this article I will discuss the way in which the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* [NODE, 1998] has attempted to organise entries in such a way that the link between the various meanings is clearly presented. To this end I will first discuss, and analyse, what the NODE itself says about its aims. I will then briefly discuss the subject of metaphor itself, after which I will analyse in detail how the NODE has set about its aims in actual practice. I will focus, though not exclusively, on how the link between basic ('core') meaning and figurative meaning is presented. Finally, I will present the conclusions to be drawn from this study.

## 2 The New Oxford Dictionary of English

This dictionary was published in 1998 and its declared policy is to be

> informed by currently available evidence and current thinking about language and cognition. . . . In particular, the *focus has been on a different approach to an understanding of 'meaning'* and how this relates to the structure, organization, and selection of material for the dictionary. . . . Foremost among them [i.e. the new techniques, VdM] is an emphasis on identifying what is 'central and typical' . . . (*from preface, emphasis mine*).

> Within each part of speech the first definition given is the **core sense**. The general principle on which the senses in the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* are organized is that each word has at least one core meaning, to which a number of subsenses may be attached. It there is more than one core sense (see below), this is introduced by a bold sense number. Core meanings present *typical, central uses of the word in question* [my emphasis] in modern standard English, as established by research on and analysis of the British National Corpus and other corpora and citation databases. The core meaning is the one that represents *the most literal sense that the word has in modern usage* [my emphasis]. This is not necessarily the same as the oldest meaning, because word meanings change over time. Not is it necessarily the most frequent meaning, because figurative senses are sometimes the most frequent. It is the meaning accepted by native speakers as the one that is most established as literal and central.[2]
>
> The core sense also acts as a gateway to other, related subsenses. . . . There is *a logical relationship* [my emphasis] between each subsense and the core sense under which it appears. The organization of senses according to this logical relationship is designed to help the user . . . in building up an understanding of *how senses in the language relate to one another* [my emphasis] and how the language is constructed on this model. The main types of relationship of core sense to subsense are as follows:
>
> (a) **figurative extension of the core sense** . . . [3]
>
> (b) **specialized case of the core sense . . .** [4]
>
> (c) **other extension or shift in meaning, retaining one or more elements of the core sense . . .** [5]

Clearly, the NODE is in a very commendable manner concerned with the question I referred to above, to wit the need to cater to the user's need of vocabulary development and enhancement, the need to see that word meanings often hang together and should not be seen as totally independent. The introduction continues by saying that there may be more than one core sense, as in the case of *belt*, whose first core meaning is 'a strip of leather or other material etc.', after which a second core is 'a strip of material used in various technical applications . . . '. Though one need not necessarily quarrel with the *general* notion of two or more possible cores, this

example is particularly badly chosen, since the second core sense, with again (!) the word *strip* in its definition, cannot possibly be seen as unconnected with the first. Likewise, core three begins with 'a strip of encircling band . . . ', again with *strip*. These so-called core senses seem to be *specialised* cases, so subsenses, rather than cores (also cf. [Landau 1999]). This particular illustration of NODE's practice makes one suspect that there may be a yawning abyss between theory and practice, or that at least practice is less straightforward than the introduction wishes to suggest. At any rate, the concepts of 'core' and 'subsense' need a much clearer definition in order to be separable in a workable way.

More in particular, I would like to draw attention to the core meaning being defined as the *typical, central use of the word in question* and as representing *the most literal sense that the word has in modern usage*. Also worthy of attention is the statement that there is *a logical relationship* between each subsense and the core sense under which it appears. The concept of core meaning, also called 'basic sense' (cf. [Hartmann/James 1998]), is much less simple than NODE seems to suggest. For one thing, it would have been instructive to have been told exactly *how* the editors analysed the corpora to draw conclusions about core and subsense. I have a strong suspicion that intuitions must have played a major role here. This is nothing to be ashamed of, for how could it have been otherwise in the absence of (to my knowledge) clear and objective procedures for such an analysis? But the suggestion that it was otherwise strikes me as a sales pitch that deserves no place in the front matter. Likewise, the attractive and indeed indispensable notion of 'most literal' may present more pitfalls than we like to admit (cf. [Gibbs 1994, Ch . 2]). It is on some reflection far from easy to think of *the* 'literal' meaning – and hence definition - of *dog*, let alone superordinate terms like *animal* or *plant* (cf. [Béjoint 1994, 197] for their sense definition problems). There are many kinds of dogs, and no 'literal' definition fitting any of these kinds in every detail will be applicable to other kinds of dogs. This problem is even worse for words like *animal* or *plant*. Words are labels for concepts in our minds. Since concepts, even the one for a simple 'dog', may (to the extent that we know about them) be pretty general and abstract, the notion of *the most literal sense that the word has in modern usage* deserves some more attention than NODE seems to suggest.

Moreover, what to think of the '*logical* relationship' said to hold between subsenses and the core sense they belong to? Here too, the proof of the pudding is metaphorically speaking in the eating, but even before examining NODE's actual practice it may be feared that this notion will have to negotiate some tricky hurdles in its application. To what extent, for example, is it logical for a person's strength of character to be called his 'spine' or 'backbone'?

However, I see the great attractiveness of an approach which is intended to present meaning as much as possible as an integrated whole, or if you like a network, instead of a series of seemingly independent definitions. I will now first briefly discuss the subject of 'metaphor' before looking at NODE's actual application of its policies.[6]

# 3 Metaphors

In my 1999 paper I discussed the case of *morass*, defined in its non-literal sense as 'a complicated and confusing situation that is difficult to get out of' [LDOCE]. The example I used was *[he] has got stuck in a morass of procedure and paperwork*. If this definition were a true representation of its meaning, what would in actual fact be said here would simply be: *[he] has got*

*stuck in a complicated and confusing situation that is difficult to get out of of procedure and paperwork.* This is obviously not correct, for it would mean that in this use of *morass* there would be no associative semantic link at all with the notion of a *real* morass, which is hard to believe even apart from the fact that quite characteristically for such cases the context (i.e. the collocates) would also fit the literal sense of *morass* perfectly: cf. the collocate expression *got stuck in* (here of course to be taken metaphorically). What we do do in the sentence under discussion is comparing the notions of 'morass' and 'procedure and paperwork', in which process parts of the notion of morass are transferred to the notions of procedure and paperwork. The latter notions are said to be like a morass, by way of speaking: 'we bring out features of something by making a comparison with something *that does not possess those features*' [White 1996, 55]. By means of metaphorical transfer we transfer meaning elements to a notion (here 'procedure and paperwork') that does not ordinarily have these elements: 'metaphor is based on transferring semantic elements from one concept, and relations from one semantic field, to another, thereby enriching the latter with features it does not itself have by nature' [van der Meer 1999, 200] The most successful and preferred metaphors introduce 'a novel view of the target, either producing new beliefs about the target[7] or restructuring (or refocusing ...) our existing beliefs in a new and startling way' [van der Meer 1999, 200]. When we use a metaphor, even a conventional one, we think of one concept in terms of itself and – additionally - partly in terms of another one. I say here 'partly', because obviously the source's entire content is *not* transferred to the target. How the selection from the source's sense elements is made is still very much a moot question. In the case of conventional metaphors, like *morass*, the dictionary has to describe this conventional use, and it is here that dictionaries differ very much among themselves – generally, their presentational methods strongly inculcate the impression that the various 'meanings' of a word or expression are highly independent of each other (cf. [van der Meer 1997] for a discussion of the practice of the major learner's dictionaries).

NODE has chosen to present meaning in terms of cores and subsenses, many of which are metaphors of the core meanings. This is a laudable aim, for it is based on the recognition that meanings form networks (in Gibbs' terminology, [Gibbs 1994]).[8] It will now be interesting to see how NODE has actually put its theory into practice. I will to this end examine how NODE illustrates its aims in its own front matter and then study the treatment of the word *clear* in NODE.

# 4 NODE and its treatment of cores and subsenses

It has already been indicated that the statement in NODE that there is a 'logical relationship' between core and subsense may not be so easy to work out and to present. Even the introduction itself seems to find the going tough here. After the statement about the logical relationship the word *backbone* is discussed, with its core sense 'the series of vertebrae in a person or animal, extending from the skull to the pelvis; the spine'. One of its subsenses is 'figurative the chief support of a system or organisation; the mainstay: *these firms are the backbone of our industrial sector*'. Strikingly, in spite of the putative logical link there is no formal indication at all - by means of shared words - of this link in the sense definitions: none of the major category words are shared by the two definitions (surprisingly, the subsense contains another metaphor, the word *mainstay*).

I, of course, do not quarrel with the notion that there is a strong link between the core and the subsense, but I do claim that this is not at all formally demonstrated by means of the subsense definition as formulated here.[9] The only clue is the word *figurative* preceding the definition. The idea here is apparently that a system or organisation is seen as a body ( the word *body* itself is not mentioned in the core definition!) of a person or animal, and that which supports (itself another metaphor) this body is compared to a backbone, which literally supports the body. To what extent all this is 'logical' is, again, a little uncertain. What is certain is that all this is left to the users to work out for themselves. And this, to be sure, is quite a bit, though in such cases admittedly we do it effortlessly. The basic and familiar metaphor, in the [Lakoff/Johnson 1980] sense, is A SYSTEM/ORGANISATION IS A LIVING ORGANISM. More detailed substantiations are then, instead of ORGANISM, for example: A BODY LIKE PRIMATES HAVE. About such bodies we know that they are kept upright, or straight, by means of the backbone, without which a proper body is imposible. From the basic (orientational) metaphor UP IS GOOD it follows that *backbone* must be good, because it makes a system/organisation good and is indispensable for the system.

This entire chain of reasoning links the core sense with the subsense. But this is all left implicit in the definitions. One cannot, of course, expect the NODE to display all such reasonings in full, but I do hold that already in this example in the introduction the reader is rather let down: the rather proudly announced new way of presenting the links between the various senses *only* consists of placing a definition underneath a core sense. The user himself has to work out the reason *why* it is put there, for the definitions themselves provide no clue at all. I think it should be possible to design definitions in such a way that the link becomes clear without presenting the full chain of the argument leading to the metaphorical interpretation as presented above. What I have in mind is core definitions that provide sufficient information for the subsenses to be easily associable with, and derivable from, the core. Such core definitions could be called *cover definitions*, covering in a general way all derived subsense definitions. In this particular case, instead of NODE's core definition we might have had (to some extent sticking to the original definition):

> **backbone** 'the series of vertebrae in a person or animal's body, extending from the skull to the pelvis; the **backbone** supports the body by giving it strength and firmness and keeping it straight;[10] the spine',

after which the subsense would simply be:

> 'figurative *the backbone* of anything like a system, organisation etc. seen as a body gives it the support, firmness and strength to function properly; when you say that *someone has no backbone* you mean that they have no strength of character.[11]

In this way we have at least some *parallellism* and some *explanatory force* in the definitions, thereby underpinning the claim about relationships between subsense and core, though it need not necessarily be called 'logical'. There will no doubt be better definers than I am, but the basic idea is clear: in such cases definitions should be linked as much as possible by parallel definitions and parallel vocabulary. Since the basic metaphors we live by are ususally interpreted

automatically, no further formal argument is needed. We could do this similarly for the word *spine*, defined in its core sense as 'a series of vertebrae extending from the skull to the small of the back, enclosing the spinal cord and providing support for the thorax[12] and abdomen; the backbone'[13] and in its subsense *inter alia* as '*figurative* a thing's central feature or main source of strength[14]: *players who will form the spine of our side | Puerto Rico's mountainous spine*'.

It should be pointed out that there is nothing predictable, and hence perhaps 'logical', about such metaphorical meaning extensions. The link between the core sense and subsense can be made more or less explicit, but that is about all. And of course, a dictionary need not bother with this, as it is not a book on linguistics (though it should use the results of modern linguistics).

We have so far been looking at a relatively simple example in the introduction. A trawl through the dictionary revealed that this is not an isolated case. I will now demonstrate that much more complex cases can also, obviously with varying success, and keeping in mind the obscuring effect of the historical development of language, be dealt with in this way. To this end I will try to rewrite NODE's analysis of the word *clear*, i.e. the adjectival meanings. It will be interesting to see if a word that has been in the language for so long can be adequately treated in the manner theoretically favoured by NODE but not always carried out quite successfully.

# 5 **The analysis of** clear (adj.)

The NODE analysis of **clear** is as follows (layout generally as in NODE):

> **Clear** ▶ adjective
>
> 1. easy to perceive, understand, or interpret: *the voice on the telephone was clear and strong | clear and precise directions | her handwriting was clear | am I* ***making myself clear****?*
>
>    ■ leaving no doubt; obvious or unambiguous: *it was clear that they were in a trap | a clear case of poisoning.* ■ having or feeling no doubt or confusion: *every pupil must be clear about what is expected.*
>
> 2. free of anything that marks or darkens something, in particular:
>
>    ■ (of a substance) transparent: *the clear glass of the French windows | a stream of clear water.* ■ free of cloud, mist, or rain: *the day was fine and clear.* ■ (of a persons skin) free from blemishes. ■ (of a persons eyes) unclouded, shining: I looked into her clear gray eyes. ■ (of a colour) pure andintense: *clear blue delphiniums.* ■ archaic (of a fire) burning with little smoke: *a bright, clear flame.*
>
> 3. free of any obstructions or unwanted objects: *with a clear road ahead he shifted into high gear | I had a clear view in both directions | his desktop was almost clear.*
>
>    ■ (of a period of time) free of any appointments or commitments: *the following Saturday, Maggie had a clear day.* ■ (predic) (of a person) free of something undesirable or unpleasant: *after 18 months of treatment he was*

***clear of*** *TB.* ■ (of a persons mind) free of something which impairs logical thought: *in the morning, with a clear head, she would tackle all her problem .* ■ (of a persons conscience) free of guilt.

4. (predic.) **(clear of)** not touching; away from: *the lorry was wedged in the ditch, one wheel clear of the ground.*
5. (attrib.) complete; full:*you must give seven clear days notice of the meeting.* ■ (of a sum of money) net: *a clear profit of £1,100.*
6. Phonetics denoting a palatalized form of of the sound of the letter *l* (as in leaf in south-eastern English speech). Often contrasted with **dark**.

Remarks: it seems to me that NODE here behaves in a similar way to the learner's dictionaries that I criticised in 1997 for defining the derived, non-literal senses *before* the literal senses. The reason for these dictionaries was the greater frequency of the derived uses. The senses described under 1 are in my view more abstract than those under 2. In fact, they appear to all intents and purposes to be more or less metaphorical, and hence derived, uses of 2, as instantiations of the basic metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING. One might therefore, given NODE's official policy, have expected the cases under 1 to have been subsumed as subsenses under 2 (roughly definable as 'there being nothing to impede UNDERSTANDING = SEEING'). The sense given under 3 also seems to be derived. In this case the basic idea, the core sense, shifts from things called clear in the sense of transparent, i.e. without anything impeding a clear view *through* them, to things without anything impeding a clear view *around* them, so that the meaning can then also involve notions like being 'not touching', 'whole, complete and not overlapped by anything else' (cf. senses 4 and 5). This had better be called a case of metonymy in the cases where literal seeing is involved, but here too there may be a shift to more abstract and hence rather more metaphorical uses: *after 18 months of treatment he was* **clear of** *TB.* This, in my view, takes care of the first 5 senses as distinguished by NODE. The sixth sense is a case of *synaesthesia*: there is a shift from seeing to hearing, in the sense that a 'clear *l*' is a pure *l*, the purity presumably being caused by the fact that in the case of this type of *l* there is no admixture of sound caused by the major apical articulation being accompanied by the simultaneous raising of the body of the tongue. I think that the example under 1 (*the voice on the telephone was clear and strong*) had better be considered in the same light as a case of conventional synaesthesia: clear voices are transparent or pure because there is in their case no impediment to hearing caused by admixture.[15]

If all this is more or less acceptable the article could be rewritten as follows:[16]

**Clear**

► adjective ALLOWING UNIMPEDED VISION[1]

■ [2] allowing unimpeded and full VISION **THROUGH**, easy to see through: *the clear glass of the French windows* | *a stream of clear water* | *the day was fine and clear* (i.e. free of cloud, mist, or rain) [3] | *a bright, clear flame*; ► hence[4] (figuratively, as if UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING)[5]: easy to comprehend: *clear and precise directions* | *her handwriting was clear* | *am I* ***making***

***myself clear**? | it was clear that they were in a trap | a clear case of poisoning* | ▶ hence (figuratively, as if HEARING IS SEEING)[5] without anything impeding hearing: *the voice on the telephone was clear and strong*; (when applied to sounds) Phonetics denoting a palatalized form of the sound of the letter *l* (as in ***leaf*** in south-eastern English speech). Often contrasted with **dark**.[6]

- [2] allowing unimpeded and full VISION **OF**, free of things blocking vision of: *with a clear road ahead he shifted into high gear | his desktop was almost clear* | (predic.) **(clear of)** *the lorry was wedged in the ditch, one wheel clear of the ground* (i.e. not touching; away from)[3]; ▶ hence (as if THINKING IS SEEING): without anything blocking the thinking process: *in the morning, with a clear head, she would tackle all her problems*; (of persons) *every pupil must be clear about what is expected.* ▶ hence: (figuratively) allowing unimpeded full thinking **of**: (attrib.) *you must give seven clear days notice of the meeting* (i.e. complete; full)[3]; (of a sum of money) net: *a clear profit of £1,100*; ▶ hence: figuratively free of: (predic) (of a person) free of something undesirable or unpleasant: *after 18 months of treatment he was **clear of** TB; the following Saturday, Maggie had a clear day* (of a period of time: free of any appointments or commitments)
- [2] allowing the vision to be unimpeded **BY** distracting elements of the object seen: *clear blue delphiniums* (of a colour: pure and intense); *I looked into her clear gray eyes*; ▶ hence: allowing the VISION ITSELF to be unimpeded: the unimpeded vision itself: *I had a clear view in both directions*.

Remarks:

1: It is in some cases perhaps possible to introduce the entry by means of a 'cover definition', serving as a kind of summary.

2: I have refrained from numbering the senses, since this would leave the wrong impression that they are more distinct and more separate than in fact they are, and secondly since this might imply too much that e.g. the sense under 1 is more important than 2. This need not always be the case.

3: This is rather an explanatory gloss (of the example in context) than a genuine sense definition. This technique is frequently used in CIDE (cf. [van der Meer 1997]).

4: Derived, 'non-basic' senses (generally the clear cases of metonymy and non-literal use) are prececed by '▶ hence' to show their derived, or if you like, their 'subsense' status.

5: This basic or 'root' metaphor nicely shows the link between literal and (secondary) non-literal meaning. Space allowing, such techniques might be tried out consistently. It seems to me that such basic metaphors are intuitively so familiar that they will be understood without any difficulty at all.

6: Also cf. my remarks about synaesthesia above.

# 6 Conclusions

This exercise has taught me a couple of things. In the first place, it is all right to criticise NODE for its treatment of subsense and core, but a certain amount of humbleness is in order here. The above is the best I have been able to come up with after staring at the screen and the paper on my desk for a considerable time – time the compilers of NODE no doubt did not have in such large quantities. Yet, the result is far from satisfactory,[17] though I do think that it is an improvement on the NODE treatment of this particular word – at least *if promises in the front matter are to be honoured*. The reason for this sense of dissatisfaction with respect to this NODE-style solution as attempted by me is the fact that there is to my knowledge no genuinely workable and generally acceptable method for fully analysing – and presenting! – the meaning(s) in the way NODE seems to have had in mind. In that respect it is far easier to treat the various senses in a historically or frequency-based order. I am, as a matter of fact, quite sure that a full analysis will in many cases lead to dead ends, as a consequence of the fact that language is the historical product of many generations, where links between senses may die and cause 'missing links'. Secondly, NODE itself has obviously bitten off more than it can chew.[18] What struck me when going through a number of entries was the fact that again and again the compilers have missed opportunities to present senses (or 'uses' rather) as metaphorically derived rather than as core meanings. To mention one example, **bombshell** is defined as having three core senses: '1. overwhelming surprise or disappointment; 2 a very attractive woman; 3. an artillery shell'. This seems to me to turn things on their head: the three senses are clearly related, in that the core sense is the literal one of artillery shell, from which the other senses have been derived as metaphors, i.e. clearly conventional ones. The link is clearly also manifest in idioms like *drop a bombshell* (sense 1), with the collocator *drop*. There is moreover the case of *sex bomb*, showing that this idea of metaphorical explosions, caused by seeing attractive members of usually the opposite sex, is far from being an isolated case but is part of a real synchronic pattern. It seems as if NODE, despite its stated core and subsense policies, still in practice quite frequently adheres to the frequency-based principle of ordering and arranging senses. As already stated, there seems to have been a lack of awareness among the compilers with respect to non-literal use. NODE appears to have been rather unaware of the huge amount of attention currently being showered on the study of metaphor and figurative language in general. In three recent papers [van der Meer 1996b, van der Meer 1997, van der Meer 1999] I have tried to prove the importance of showing the links between non-literal and literal uses of words and expressions, in particular for the foreign dictionary user, implying that the basic, literal, senses that are synchronically still relevant[19] should be treated first and that the non-literal senses should be clearly presented as derived from that basic sense.

In spite of all this, NODE has clearly taken a principled decision deserving our generous praise. In this respect, it is – in theory at least though alas not quite in practice - swimming against the deplorable corpus linguistics inspired current of exclusively frequency-based ordering principles. In my view, dictionaries should present the full meaning of a linguistic unit by means of a coherent semantic 'picture' showing links between senses wherever they are relevant. Yet, and there's the rub, all this should be done in a user-friendly way. I have argued elsewhere [van der Meer 1996a] that users usually open 'the' dictionary to solve one problem at a time without being interested in the overall semantic picture. This means that *findability* as well as semantic coherence should be foremost in the minds of the compilers. This is certainly no

easy task, neither for the lexicographer nor for the layout expert. Yet it should be attempted, though not forgetting that language is inherited from earlier generations, which means that developments through time often destroy or obscure semantic links, thus giving rise to a blurred picture. In spite of this it is in my view one of the challenges of lexicography in the coming years to devise methods in which findability (which as one might say tends to make us look for one single tree at a time) can be reconciled with the desirability to see the entire wood: the challenge is to show the wood *and* the individual trees, that the trees are part of the wood and the wood consists of trees.

A glance at how the OED describes the adjective *clear* quickly teaches us in how many directions a word's meanings may develop during its long history. Due to the obsolescence of certain meanings, which may cause 'missing links' between various stages, the result may often be a synchronic semantic picture of a fragmentary or even partly opaque nature, with meanings that are not straightforwardly derivable (from core meanings). I suspect that this is one of the reasons why it proved to be so hard to devise a completely coherent description. Another reason may well be the choice NODE made from the available corpus material, which may underlie this fragmentary nature.[20] Perhaps in such cases the user should not be bothered too much by perhaps historically correct but synchronically doubtful links between senses. In the end the lexicographer's common sense judgment will always remain indispensable. Let us hope that lexicography will always remain an art in addition to being a craft.

# Notes

[1] Also cf. Gibbs 1993, which deals with conventional metaphors as idioms that are part of our conceptual system. As long as metaphors are part of such a system they are not 'dead'. Gibbs makes the relevant observation that the meaning of metaphors as idioms is not equivalent to their literal paraphrases, as in our case the paraphrase of *defuse.* Thus *spill the beans* means more than simply *reveal the secret* (p. 73). There is in fact a whole set of meaningful and relevant presuppositions. In our context the same can be said of e.g. metaphorical *defuse,* or for *morass* for that matter.

[2] It would have been extremely interesting to hear how this was established.

[3] Here an example is given of a subsense of *backbone* used figuratively: 'the chief support of a system or organization; the mainstay'

[4] Here an example is given of *ball* used as a subsense 'a delivery of the ball by the bowler to the batsman'.

[5] Here the subsense of *bamboo* is given 'the hollow jointed stem of this plant, used as a cane or to make furniture and impements'

[6] Please note that the phenomenon of metaphors belongs to only one of the three kinds of subsense distinguished by NODE.

[7] The metaphor is the *source* and the *target* is what the metaphor is about [Lakoff/Johnson 1980].

[8] It should be obvious that a metaphor ceases to be a proper part of such a network when it is 'dead'. Since a dead metaphor is in fact no longer a metaphor, it is to be considered a homonym with the word still having the original meaning (if still there, of course). Thus, *pupil* (iris of eye) and*pupil* (a student) are homonyms to speakers of English (as the original Latin metaphor must now be considered lost), as

are likewise probably to most English speakers *crane* (the bird) and *crane* (the machine), though the possibility is not to be discounted that speakers with a strongly developed linguistic intuititon or training see enough links to keep the metaphor alive, if only just. As always, there should be 'grounds', i.e. similarity or analogy, between the two concepts, and it is obvious that these grounds may gradually weaken and become lost, leading to 'metaphor death', though not necessarily at the same time for all speakers. (also cf. [Goatley 1998, 31-34]). When a word no longer evokes what Goatley calls a hat Goatley calls a 'double reference' (p. 33), as shown for example in the linguistic context through collocates or in whatever way, the metaphor is no longer active and hence dead.

[9] Incidentally, the word *spine*, which appears in the core, cannot be used in its subsense in the same way as *backbone.*

[10] Obviously, the words 'the **backbone** supports the body by giving it strength and firmness and keeping it straight' are part of our *concept* of **backbone**, not of the physical object itself. Lexicographic definitions deal with notions and not with physical objects that are unrelated to humans.

[11] Incidentally, the NODE definition is far too restricted, as can easily be gathered from the examples found in the BNC. Cf. an example like the following: *They are the BACKBONE of any wardrobe.*

[12] Using *thorax* to define *spine* is using a more difficult word to explain a relatively easier word.

[13] Note the vicious circle of *backbone* using *spine* and *spine* using *backbone* in their definitions.

[14] If we link up the words 'support for the thorax' and 'main source of strength' we have here at least some indication of a link between core and subsense.

[15] There is, of course, an explanation in articulatory and acoustic phonetics. Note that apparently the human ear intuitively interprets sound as pure and transparent on the analogy of vision.

[16] My purpose here is to give an example of how it could be done. Obviously, in real life the defining style and defining vocabulary (if any) of the dictionary would have to be kept in mind.

[17] Remember that this is only part of the complete entry for *clear*: the verb and the adverb etc. have not even been dealt with yet!

[18] Just examine unsatisfactorily treated words like *arm, bombshell, bright, browse, coin, command, core, doldrums, founder, lame, pushover, sloppy, sloshy, spine, pull out all the stops, sweet, yarn.*

[19] When e.g. metaphors are really 'dead' they should obviously be given core sense treatment. We can anticipate that opinions may differ somewhat here.

[20] A third cause is, of course, my own inexperience as a definer.

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