

A relevance-theoretic approach to word meaning: An investigation within the context of “*Karşı*,” a poem by O. Veli Kanık

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Bu çalışmada sözcük anlamı konusunda Bağıntı Kuramı çerçevesinde Carston’ın (2002) ileri sürdüğü bir öneri Türkçe veri üzerinde sınanmaktadır. Çalışmada, ilk önce O. Veli Kanık’ın “*Karşı*” başlıklı şiirinde yer alan aynı sözcüğün yinelenerek oluşturduğu sözcüksel bağlaşıklık metnin iç bağlamında (İng. co-text) incelenmekte ve sözcük için bir kavramsal düzen (İng. concept-schema) önerilmektedir. İncelemenin sonucunda Carston’ın sözcüklerin anlamının bir kavrama karşılık gelmekten çok bir kavramsal düzen oluşturdukları yolundaki savının geçerliliğinin olabileceği, ancak bu düzenin söylemlerin oluşturdukları düzenler içinde incelenmesi gerektiği düşüncesine yer verilmektedir.

1. Introduction

This paper re-examines the findings of a discourse analytic study carried out on a Turkish poem written by O. Veli Kanık, “*Karşı*,” where the object of the study was to apply the use of the discursive construct, cohesion, to the analysis of poetic texts (Ruhi, 1986). A significant conclusion of that study was that lexical reiteration, a form of lexical cohesion in the Hallidayan functional paradigm (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), is a problematic concept since reiteration does not necessarily encode sameness of meaning. In other words, lexical reiteration as a cohesive device “is not sufficient and informative enough for an understanding of how the device cooperates with other devices to give a text the meaning it [generates]” (Ruhi, 1986). More specifically, the problem in the textual analysis concerned the accounting for the emergence of the difference in meaning assigned to the last two lines of the poem (17 and 18), which repeat the first two (1 and 2 below) in a manner that would not conflict with the definition of lexical reiteration in functional grammar (cf. the Appendix for the poem)¹:

1/17	Gerin, bedenim, gerin;	<i>Stretch, body. I p agr., stretch</i>
2/18	Doğan güne karşı	<i>Dawn.part. day.dat karşı</i>

It was noted in the study that, while *karşı* in line 2 encodes a sense roughly equivalent to ‘facing,’ lines 3-16 build up to the deduction of a sense of

'opposition' for the same word. Granted that these are stabilized meanings for *karşı* in Turkish, the point is that lexical reiteration itself is not conducive to this interpretation. Thus, the study argued that it was necessary to look into the collocations of the word in the co-text and suggested that "a procedural analysis of text production might yield deeper insights in discourse analysis" in accounting for the above linguistic phenomenon in a theoretically informed manner.

The present study picks up from that point onwards to examine how a relevance-theoretic account of lexical meaning might make up for the observed weakness of a functional perspective and develop an account based on Carston's (2002) recent proposal to the effect that lexical items do not encode concepts but act as pointers to a conceptual region, allowing access to information that would be relevance-constrained by processes of pragmatic inference. For this purpose, the study first summarizes Carston's perspective on the encoding of concepts through lexical forms. The study then presents a functional analysis of the use of the lexical form *karşı* in the poem, working with such discourse-related concepts as collocation and co-text, and discusses the relevance of Carston's proposal in view of the functional analysis. The study concludes that Carston's proposal, enriched with a discursive perspective, takes account of both the enrichment and specification of word meaning in utterances, and that the loose use of lexical forms (Sperber and Wilson, 1997), rather than being an exception in language use, is the norm.

2. Lexical meaning and concepts in Relevance Theory

Lexical items and concepts relate to each other in the original formulation of Relevance Theory in Sperber and Wilson (1986) in a number of ways. As it is not possible to go into all the theoretical ramifications of the relation within the limits of this study, only those aspects of the description of concepts that pinpoint to implications for lexical meaning will be focused on. Sperber and Wilson (1986:86) propose an atomic structure to concepts in mental representation, where they state that they are "psychological objects considered at a fairly abstract level" which are "address[es] in memory, a heading under which various types of information can be stored and retrieved."

Three types of information, or entries are recognised, which are: logical, encyclopedic, and lexical. Logical entries are meaning postulates involving elimination rules in lexical semantics, where, for example, the relation between *know* and *believe* is posited to exist in a manner such that knowledge of the former precludes replacement with the latter (ibid., 86, 92). The encyclopaedic entry is modelled on notions such as schemas, frames, prototypes and scripts that are fairly "stereotypical assumptions and expectations about frequently encountered objects or events" that are highly accessible units of information to humans despite showing

individual variation and are developed and modified over time (ibid., 88). What is of significance to later discussions of word meaning by Sperber and Wilson is that encyclopedic entries carry not only “factual assumptions” but “assumption schemas which an appropriate context may convert into full-fledged assumptions” (ibid., 88). The lexical entry is “the natural language counterpart of the concept” if such an item exists in the language. Hence, the model allows for the fact that there is no one-to-one mapping between concepts and lexical items and the fact that concepts may not have natural language counterparts. However, as will be noticed in the above descriptions, the essential idea in the original formulation is that lexical items would correspond to concepts in memory.²

Thus, it might be counter-intuitive to suggest that lexical forms do not encode concepts in mental representation, but actually function as “pointers to a concept involved in the speaker’s meaning” (Sperber and Wilson, 1997:196-97). As users of natural language we feel that lexical forms such as *masa* (table) and *oda* (room) correspond to the relatively stable concepts, MASA and ODA. But consider cases such as *cinayet masası* (homicide department) or *mühendisler odası* (chamber of engineers). Such expressions would be examined as instances of metonymy and would, therefore, be considered as cases of figurative speech. More recent approaches to the semantics of languages would take account of such expressions through an argument based on the existence of schemas that structure concepts (cf., for example, Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/1985, and Ruhi, 1999 for an application).

However, leaving aside such cases, even when one considers other lexicalisation processes in language such as those reflected in derivational processes, it is observed that the processes of encoding concepts through lexical forms do not establish a one-to-one mapping of form and concept in predictable ways. To illustrate this point with two derivational morphemes in Turkish, consider the cases of {-CA} and {-sl} in the manner that they pick up different properties of the concepts ÇOCUK (child), ERKEK (man) and KADIN (woman). These words are what have been referred to in semantics as natural kind terms, which are considered to correspond to/encode stable concepts (cf., Carston, 2002:362-3 on the same view). However, theories in cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistic research on lexical meaning (e.g., Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987; Collins and Loftus, in Gleason and Ratner, 1998:200) inspired by Wittgenstein’s (1953/1978) classic treatise, *Philosophical Investigations*, on family resemblances in lexical meaning, somewhat challenge this view and argue that concepts corresponding to lexical items may be best described in terms of associated networks of features (cf. Gleason and Ratner, 1998:200-2).³ Thus, the first morpheme, when attached to ÇOCUK, selects characteristic behavioral properties of ÇOCUK (roughly equivalent to *childish* in English); with the second morpheme, the derived word points to a different set associated with the same concept (Eng. *childlike*). The interesting point here is that a lexical item that supposedly represents a stable concept,

ÇOCUK, actually does not correspond to a mental file having stable information as Sperber and Wilson (1997:123) would suggest for such lexical items, but is ambivalent, if not fuzzy, between a whole array of semantic features. Thus, even though the meanings of the derived words correspond to relatively stabilized concepts in the Turkish lexicon, the derivational process itself gives clear counter-evidence to the claim that lexical forms correspond to well-defined concepts.⁴

Sperber and Wilson (1997:121-2) too are ambivalent on the topic when they say, "It may happen that the intended concept is the very one encoded by the word." In discussing the implications of their inferential approach, they say that "the words in a language can be used to convey not only *the concepts they encode*, but also indefinitely many other related concepts to which they might point in a given context" (my emphasis). This reasoning suggests that the scholars entertain a dual conceptualization of lexical meaning, one that accepts that some lexical forms encode concepts, and another that implies that it is utterance meaning as opposed to sentence meaning that specifies how hearers are to arrive at the conceptual encoding intended by the speaker. Naturally, this kind of underdetermination of meaning is a fundamental premise of the relevance-theoretic research project in pragmatics. Note, for instance, their major argument on linguistic semantics: "Linguistically encoded semantic representations are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent anything of interest" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986:174). Such a conceptualization of lexical meaning suggests that they retain the classic division of labor between semantic and pragmatic meaning, where pragmatic meaning as generated by, for example, metaphorical use of language is explained in their framework through the notion of 'loose talk' (Sperber and Wilson, 1985/1991). Roughly, the concept of 'loose talk' is based on the idea that an utterance may bear interpretive resemblance to another utterance or thought in a context in which it is used such that the use of the utterance "share[s] similar contextual implications" with that utterance or thought (ibid, 542). Adapting an example that they discuss (ibid., 545), suppose that a person who lives in Gölbaşı says 'I live in Ankara' during a talk in Istanbul. She would be using the expression loosely since the location is on the outskirts of the city. Even so it would be a more accurate representation of her residence than if she were to say 'I live near Ankara.' Words used loosely allow for the selection and the carrying over of those characteristics of a concept as applicable in a particular context into the construction of a new *ad hoc* concept (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 546-547; Carston, 2002:322, passim). This inferential process is guided by the search for relevance - technically defined as the cognitive and communicative principles of relevance in Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1997). Put simply, the search for relevance implies an effort that yields cognitive effects (e.g., a strengthening or revision of beliefs) in the form of implicatures (cf. Sperber and Wilson, 1986 for a full description of implicatures and cognitive effects).

What is important to note here is that Sperber and Wilson retain the idea that words may encode concepts in the form of logical and encyclopedic information. However, Carston (2002) takes issue with this assumption and speculates that all concepts may, in a sense, be *ad hoc* entities, such that words (lexical forms) do not correspond to concepts but are themselves building schemas for concepts, whereby a lexical form develops its meaning out of the token-experiences to which the lexical form applies. In this sense, Carston takes Sperber and Wilson's (1986:88) assertion that concepts contain assumption schemas to its logical conclusion such that natural language words provide the pointers to these schemas. To illustrate with an example based on Carston's discussion of *open* in English, the word *açmak* in Turkish encodes a schematic representation of events to which the word would apply:

- (1) a. Hava açtı
 b. Oya kapağı açtı
 c. Elbise seni açtı

In spite of this suggestion, as noted above, Carston does introduce the caveat that some words may have stable conceptual content (e.g., natural kind terms like *cat* and *dog*; cf., Note 4 below), while others may encode "concept schemas or pointers" (e.g., verbs like *open*) or produce inferential constraints in utterance interpretation (e.g., discourse connectives like *but*).

Carston's proposal has significant implications on several issues such as metaphor interpretation, polysemy, cross-linguistic variation in schema formation and language acquisition. Nevertheless, in this study, we will concentrate on the issue of polysemy, that is, related senses of a word, as this was identified above as the problematic case in the textual processing of the poem, "*Karşı*."

3. Reiteration of *karşı* and other occurrences of the form⁵

Reiteration in "*Karşı*" is not restricted to the lexical form *karşı*; there are several instances of what may be described as syntactic reiteration (e.g., lines 3 and 8 repeat conditional clauses and lines 2, 5, 9, 11-14 repeat postpositional phrases with *karşı*). However, since such repetitions are traditionally referred to as parallelisms in linguistic analyses, the relevance of these repetitions will be discussed only insofar as they concern the reiteration of *karşı*.⁶

The lexical form *karşı* is both syntactically and semantically multi-functional in that it can function as a noun, an adjective or an adverbial that take NP and clausal complementation. It can form postpositional phrases (e.g., *sabaha karşı*; lit., towards morning). Furthermore, it functions as an adverbial in case-marked constructions such as *karşı karşıya* (face to face). The item also appears in several

verbal phrases (e.g., *karşı koy-*; Eng. to oppose) and compounds (e.g., *karşı sav*; Eng. antithesis).

karşı appears eight times in the poem, excluding its syntactically isolated use as the title of the poem. The word occurs in phrases with stative meaning, the only source of transitivity encoded in the phrases resulting from the use of the dative case marker that is assigned by the word. Hence, the implicatures to be derived from these syntactic structures essentially derive from the participant frameworks of the NPs in the phrases (cf. Goffman, 1967/1982). However, these repetitions are not semantically equivalent. In line 2 the form occurs in a script-like situation of facing the day ahead, and evokes the image of the person "greeting, contemplating," so to speak, the day. Naturally, there is a myriad of other images or propositions that could be deduced as implicatures from the script. However, the significant point is that it is in complete contrast with the reiteration in line 18, by which point in the reading of the poem, the word has occurred five times in lines 5, 11, 13 and 14 with the sense of 'opposition' being mildly introduced in the idiomatic expression in line 5 and increasingly strongly implied in a scalar manner in 11, 13 and 14. These instances are repeated for ease of comparison:

Ele güne karşı. <i>public.dat karşı</i>	5
*** Dişli dişliye karşı; <i>cogwheel cogwheel.dat karşı</i>	11
**** Güçsüz güçlüye karşı. <i>powerless powerful.dat karşı</i>	13
Herkes bir şeye karşı. <i>everyone something.dat karşı</i>	14

In contrast to the above occurrences, the instances of the word in lines 9 and 16 encode a sense of 'facing':

İnsanlığın haline karşı. <i>humanity.gen state.agr.dat karşı</i>	9
Rüyalarına karşı. <i>dream.plu.agr.dat karşı</i>	16

Line 9 foreshadows the sense of 'opposition' expanded in lines 11-14, while that in 16, by introducing a different script - that of facing one's dream - creates a textual opposition both between the sense of 'opposition in the world' and the script of 'facing the day,' repeated in line 18. The day, at this point in the textual progression, is now qualified with oppositions described between the powerful and the powerless, the state of the individual and humanity, and the state of the 'little lady' with all other individuals referred to in the co-text.

A comparison of the occurrences of the lexeme reflects a significant linguistic property of the text, and that is that the lexeme does not itself generate a sense of opposition. Rather, it is the scripts associated with the participant frameworks in the NPs (e.g., *dişli dişliye*) that could produce implicatures of opposition. In line 5, the idiom, *ele güne karşı*, is ambivalent between a sense of comparison and opposition; in lines 11-14 the concepts of power (cf., the antonyms, *güçsüz - güçlü*) and the working of cogwheels against each other create contextual effects of opposition, a concept that has come to be associated with one of the word's senses (equivalents in Eng. being *against*, *facing*). However, if we consider the phrase *birine karşı saygı beslemek* (Eng. to feel respect for sby.; *karşı* being equivalent in this case to *for*), it becomes clear that *karşı* does not necessarily include the sense of opposition.⁷ Thus, the problem identified in the introduction, that is, the assignment of different readings/meanings to the same lexical form *karşı* in the last line of the poem emerges as a case of pragmatic enrichment and specification of the item, accomplished through the repeated syntactic structures leading to the construal of different social and cultural schema with each repetition. In a sense, the lexical environment of the term both constrains and enriches the implicatures that could be deduced for the term.

If we were to attempt a description of a semantic role for the term, or in Carston's terms a concept-schema, we could describe this as incorporating entities entering into some kind of stative or transitive relationship in a position where they face each other (e.g., *güne karşı* and *dişli dişliye karşı*). Whether this relation is one of opposition or simple location is a matter that depends on the specific propositional content of the utterance, which in some cases may have become conventionalized enough to encode a sense of opposition/comparison as in *ele güne karşı*. In fact, the very ambivalence of this idiom between the two senses provides strong evidence that the term *karşı*, of itself, does not encode a conceptual schema of opposition.

One can also envisage an activity kind of relationship such as one implied in *karşıya geçmek* (to cross), the sense of weak transitivity being produced by the presence of an achievement verb that assigns the dative to the term. That the essential schema is that of entities facing each other, with senses of transitive relationships being implicatures to be deduced from the co-text produced by the utterance is also present in the stative expression *güne karşı*. It is easily possible to imagine situations where the state can be one of simple contemplation as opposed to contemplated action (cf. the first stanza and the weak possibility of action referred to through the preceding conditional sentence).

4. Conclusion

The above description of the occurrences of *karşı* in the poem suggests that part of

the meaning of lexical forms is produced through a process of, if not conceptual enrichment and specification, at least one of prototypical sense enrichments. The discussion of the various reiterations of the word suggests very strongly, I believe, that Carston's proposal for accounting for word meaning is a viable research program that needs to be tested against other types of words in languages.

The present study has focused on an item that is at once both a function and a content word in Turkish. Whether the proposal would also stand to reason for other types of words (e.g., natural kind terms, cf. Note 4) is a matter for further investigation. A point that needs to be considered in working with such a research program is that the concept-schemas or "pointers" in memory (Carston, 2002:364) of lexical forms appear to be in interaction with other syntactic and semantic schemas such as those noted in this study, so that approaching lexical meaning in this perspective would require an investigation of the idea that there might be universal schemas of states and actions that constrain or govern the generation of possible lexical meanings in languages, that is, an investigation driven by knowledge-based theories of lexical meaning as opposed to feature-based approaches. Furthermore, a systematic examination of lexical items in their discursive environments might be one way of understanding what these schemas might be in the sense that the issue referred to by Carston (*ibid.*) regarding how such schemas are acquired may be addressed in an indirect yet probably similar manner by considering occurrences of lexical items in natural language texts as token experiences of the item, which guide stabilization of such general schema as the meaning of the "lexical expression as type" (*ibid.*). Carston underscores this problem in her proposal, where she suggests that, while the idea of studying word meaning without appealing to the notion of concepts may be appealing, it still has to describe what kind of schemas would account for the emergence of the pointers in word meaning. Corpus-based analyses would probably yield insight into collocational frequencies that most probably generate attested (non-)idiomatic expressions and frozen metaphors in the language.

Annotations

abil	abilitative
acc	accusative
agr	agreement marker
cond	conditional
dat	dative
gen	genitive
loc	locative
opt	optative
part	subject participle
p	person
plu	plural

Appendix

KARŞI

		Gloss
Gerin, bedenim, gerin;	1	Stretch. body.1 p agr., stretch
Doğan güne karşı.	2	Dawn.part. day.dat karşı
Duyur duyurabilirsen,	3	Make known, make known.abil.opt.cond.2 p agr
Elinin kolunun gücünü.	4	hand. 2 p agr.gen arm.2 p agr strength. 2 p agr.acc
Ele güne karşı.	5	public.dat karşı*
Bak! dünya renkler içinde!	6	Look! world color.plu. in.gen.loc
Bu güzel dünya içinde	7	This beautiful world in.gen.loc
Sevin sevinebilirsen,	8	Rejoice.rejoice.abil.opt.cond.2 p agr
İnsanlığın haline karşı.	9	Humanity.gen state.3 p agr.dat karşı
Durmadan işleyen saatlerde	10	Stop.neg.abl work.part. clock.plu.loc
Dişli dişliye karşı;	11	Cogwheel cogwheel.dat karşı
Dişlilerin arasında,	12	Cogwheel.plu.gen between.loc
Güçsüz güçlüye karşı.	13	Powerless powerful.dat karşı
Herkes bir şeye karşı.	14	Everyone something.dat karşı
Küçük hanım, yatağında, uykuda,	15	Little lady, bed.3 p agr.loc sleep.loc
Rüyalarına karşı.	16	Dream.plu. 3 p agr.dat karşı
Gerin bedenim, gerin,	17	Stretch, body.1 p agr, stretch
Doğan güne karşı.	18	Dawn.part. day.dat karşı

Notes

¹The presentation of the poem in the Appendix provides a linguistic gloss, excluding cases of idioms, since even a literal translation would only reflect the interpretation of one reader. Glosses for *karşı* have not been provided either for reasons that will become clear in the discussion.

² In this sense, Sperber and Wilson's (1986) approach to lexical meaning is similar to feature-based approaches to the organisation of the mental lexicon in that primitive features are considered to underlie information included in conceptual representation, which is opposed to knowledge-based approaches, which question the deeper semantic issues such as the reason why certain features form chunks or "hang together" and may co-occur (cf., Gleason and Ratner, 1998:190-202).

³ Wittgenstein's (1953/1978:66. *passim*) renowned notion of families of meaning corresponding to lexical items rests on the idea that uses of a word share characteristic features such that certain uses may overlap whereas others do not.

⁴ In a study comparing a semiotic and the relevance-theoretic, pragmatic approach to lexical meaning, Doğan (1992) discusses the same lexical item in the context of a number of sentences in Turkish, where, similar to Carston's (2002:362-3) qualification on natural kind terms, he allows for the possibility that lexical terms are initially processed in a similar manner to lexicographical studies of the term. He remarks: "... ilk aşamada bir 'çocuk' kavramından yola çıkılarak, sözcükbilimsel bir incelemenin yapılabileceği görüşüne katılıyoruz. Böyle bir incelemenin ilk aşamasında, bu kavrama ilişkin olarak sözlükte yer alabilecek anlamların değerlendirilmesi şeklinde olabilir" (ibid., 94). This description of online processing rests on Sperber and Wilson's (1986:85-93) model of word meanings corresponding to atomic concepts. The main argument that I will be developing here, in line with Carston (2002), is that lexical items are not retrieved as concepts, which come with

whatever information may be associated with them in a particular context from mental files, but that concepts themselves are constructed online in context (Barsalou in Carston. 2002: 358, 367; Gleason and Ratner, 1998:200-202) - hence, Carston's (2002) use of the term *ad hoc* concepts to reflect this dynamic processing in utterance interpretation.

Note also, however, that Carston's (2002:362-363) assessment of the conceptual content of natural kind terms can be contested on the basis of the derived words, *çocukça* and *çocuksu*. To illustrate her position, she concedes that

[t]hat there is a strong intuition that 'cat' encodes a concept CAT, which features in thoughts, and not just some abstract schema for constructing CAT* concepts or some pointer to knowledge about cats. ... It is notable that natural kind terms do not figure much in discussions on polysemy, perhaps because of their stable conceptual content (which is not to deny their high susceptibility to figurative use).

A point to underline here is that neither the morphologically derived items nor the bases that I refer to are figurative uses.

⁵ Word meaning within the context of poetic language could have been discussed on the basis of other poems, too. However, the poem, "*Karşı*" has been particularly chosen for two reasons. First, since the use of the word, *karşı*, in the poem exhibits no use that could be particularly associated with poetic usage in the usual sense; that is, the poem provides examples of the use of the word in 'everyday, ordinary language usage.' Second, Carston's proposal rests mainly on an analysis of a content words. By focusing on an item having both function and content word features, it has been possible to test her proposal for other word categories.

⁶ cf., Doğan 1996 (83-85) for a relevance-theoretic account of repetition within the context of interestingness in discourse.

⁷ Two simulated online readings of this poem with different audiences in a university setting produced, as expected, different interpretations for structures incorporating *karşı* and corroborate my contention that the item itself does not lead to implicatures of opposition. A reading that is worth mentioning concerns *dişli dişliye*, for which one participant suggested 'people working in harmony.' In the post-reading session he explained this has having been generated due to its collocation with 'clock' inspite of the fact that lines 12-13 (i.e., *Dişlilerin arasında / Güçsüz güçliye karşı*) had been made available during the reading.

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