

**Negotiating the Meaning of Grammatical Constructions
With Some English Confusables**

Elena Croitoru

“Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania

Abstract

The meanings of words depend on the way they pattern into phrases and sentences and how they are used in situational contexts, the development of a theory of meaning being the central programme of 'corpus semantics'.

The meaning relations between the terms in grammatical constructions is as interesting as useful to study in foreign language teaching, so much the more as the surface structure can be misleading.

Due to the difficulties and misunderstandings brought about by the English confusables (troublesome words) in text analysis, translation practice and oral interpreting, some lexical items (confusables) are analysed in this paper. We consider such an analysis very useful since confusables are sources of semantic ambiguity and translation traps.

Key words: semantic relation, grammatical construction, confusables, meaning negotiation, pairs, adjoinment series.

Traditional grammars give very little information as far as the semantic relations between words and groups of words are concerned. Neither do they make references, as Nida put it (Nida 1996: 95), to the major semantic classes (such as *entities*, *activities*, *states* as the result of some activity or event, *processes* involving a change of state or characteristics, *characteristics* and *links*) that are essential in understanding the meaningful relations between the terms in grammatical constructions. For example, with the traditionally called **possessive constructions**, the meaningful relations between the possessive noun or pronoun and the noun that follows are not necessarily those of

“possession”. A construction such as *Jane’s failing* has a somewhat different relation because the term *failing* is semantically complex and indicates both an entity [+abstraction] and an activity [+activity] i.e. the action of failing, so that the semantic relation can be stated as the person does the activity (X does Y). Nouns, belonging to the class of entities, and verbal forms, belonging to the class of activities, can co-occur in genitive constructions, but the meaning relations between the parts of such constructions are entirely different. Moreover, the surface structure (SS) can be misleading. In the construction *Jane’s failing*, the relation of the noun *failing* to *Jane* is not one of possession like in genitive constructions such as *Jane’s shoes* [+possession] = belonging to Jane, *Jane’s house* [±possession] = Jane may or may not own the house, *Jane’s son* [-possession], [+kinship] = a biological relation, *Jane’s husband* [-possession] [+family relations] = a marriage relationship, or *Jane’s punishment* [-possession] [+harm] = a doer-recipient relation, but it is referring to her imperfection or weakness. On the other hand, this meaningful relation differs from that between *failing* showing activity and *Jane* as the conceptual nucleus. Consider the following sentences:

<p>(1) <i>Jane’s failing is that she is not self-possessed.</i> [-possession] [+state] [+behaviour]</p>	<p>- this seems to be the only imperfection or weakness about her behaviour (R: <i>slăbiciune, cusur</i>)</p>
<p>(2) <i>Jane’s failing to bring it to a good end was quite a surprise.</i> [+activity] [+result]</p>	<p>- the fact that she did not succeed in doing it. (R: <i>Faptul că nu a reușit...</i>)</p>

In sentence 2), the semantic relation is equivalent to saying “X does Y”. In its turn, it is different from the semantic relation between *punishment* and *Jane* in the construction *Jane’s punishment* which means that *Jane gets punished*, i.e., “X suffers Y”.

The noun *failing* can be confused by non-native speakers of English with the noun *failure*, the relation between the two nouns not being the same as between *Jane* and *failing* in such constructions, since *failure* means the act of failing, referring to the result:

<p>(3) <i>Jane’s failure was quite a surprise.</i></p>	<p>- the fact that she was not successful</p>
---	---

[-possession] [-activity] [+result]	(R: <i>eșec, nereușită</i>)
---	------------------------------

The result of the activity of failing is also meant in sentences like:

(4) <i>As a doctor she is a complete failure.</i> [-possession] [+state] [+result]	- someone failing (R: <i>incompetent</i>)
(5) <i>The drought and the scorching sun caused crop failure.</i> [+process] [+result] [+damage]	- non production (R: <i>compromitere a recoltei; recoltă slabă</i>)
(6) <i>His business finally came to a failure.</i> [+process] [+result]	- bankruptcy (R: <i>faliment</i>)

In terms of causality, transitivity choices, explicitly indicated in sentence 5), the semantic relation is “X causes Y”. In its passive counterpart – *Crop failure was caused by the drought and scorching sun*, the semantic relation is “Y causes X”.

Similarly, the semantic relation in the construction *Mary’s canary* is different from the one in the construction *Mary’s cannery*:

(7) <i>I didn’t know that Mary’s canary had died.</i> [+possession] [+animate]	- the small singing bird that Mary has as a pet (R: <i>canar</i>)
---	---

<p>(8. a) <i>We were anxious about Mary's cannery going to a bankruptcy.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">[+possession] [-animate]</p>	<p>- the factory that Mary owns (R: <i>fabrica de conserve a Mariei</i>)</p>
<p>(8. b) <i>I didn't have the slightest idea of where Mary's cannery was.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">[+place] [-possession]</p>	<p>- the factory where Mary works putting food into cans; reference made to the fact that Mary works in a particular place. (R: <i>fabrica de conserve unde lucrează Maria</i>)</p>

Thus it is obvious that the meanings of words depend on certain linguistic conventions, on the one hand, and on inferences from real-world knowledge, on the other. That is to say, they depend on the way they pattern into phrases and sentences and on how they are used in situational contexts. Therefore, since “meaning is use”, the meaning of words and phrases differs according to their use in different contexts and situations, and, as Teubert puts it, the central programme of ‘corpus semantics’ is to develop a theory of meaning (Teubert 1999)

According to M. Stubbs (2001), such a theory of meaning should start from traditional concepts of lexical semantics including meaning as use, denotation and connotation, lexical fields, sense relations, phraseology and collocations. From a structural point of view, the vocabulary of a language consists of repeated pairs and sets of words.

The corpus analyzed in this paper sums up 32 lexical items. Originally, it consisted of a collection of 5000 lexical items used in English and Romanian different text types including fiction and non-fiction (specialized texts from literary criticism, linguistics, art, history, religion, geography, economics, science and technology), written and spoken, formal and informal.

The observational data obtained from analysing this large text collection were considered to be the main evidence for the uses and meanings of words, collocations and phrases. However, due to the difficulties encountered with the confusable (troublesome) words in textual analysis, translation practice and oral interpreting, we focused our research on **confusables**, as sources of semantic ambiguity and as translation traps.

The corpus was designed for both teaching and research purposes. Considering the many different users, the different levels of language analysis, as well as text typology, certain inferences could be made about typical language use.

The English confusables may be studied in terms of their meanings, uses, collocability and sentence patterning. Our analysis was based on the following criteria, with their subsequent typology and overlapping:

A. Formal methodological criteria

- Alphabetical order
- Pairing
- Adjoinment in series

The alphabetical order was considered to be the most useful enabling the “end-user” to easily find the lexical item he is most interested in. Pairing distinguishes especially between homophones, and between the troublesome lexical items whose forms bring about confusions.

Adjoinment in series displays the capacity of words to undergo conversion.

B. Linguistic criteria

- (Morpho)Phonemic
- Morphological
- Semantic

(Morpho)Phonemic criteria are best represented by the description of the meanings and uses of homophones.

Morphological criteria are represented by derivation and conversion, not necessarily in this order.

Semantic criteria are essential for lexical items in making up various lexical/semantic fields.

C. Stylistic and register criteria

Indications about the variety of English and about the register in which a lexical item occurs are as important as those referring to the modal concepts or degree of modality expressed.

The overlapping of the above mentioned criteria may constitute a source of error for the Romanian learners of English and a research domain for linguists.

In order to illustrate the criteria applied, we analysed a few pairs and adjointment series of confusables.

The pair of homophones **faint**, **feint** is characterized by semantic features that make the differences obvious in such contexts as:

(9) <i>The old man was faint with hunger.</i> [+weakness] [physical state]	- very weak, about to lose consciousness (R: <i>foarte slăbit, fără vlagă</i>)
(10) <i>Faint sounds could be heard downstairs.</i> [-audibility] [+circumstance]	- weak, feeble. (R: <i>slab</i>)
(11) <i>The darker it was getting, the fainter the colours were.</i> [-visibility] [+state]	- pale, fading out (R: <i>pal, șters</i>)
(12) <i>It was only faint memories from his childhood that came to his mind.</i> [+remoteness] [+mental state]	- vague, remote (R: <i>vag</i>)
(13) <i>I didn't have the faintest idea of the results.</i> [-cognition] [+mental state]	- nothing (R: <i>nici cea mai vagă idee, nimic</i>)
(14) <i>Faint heart never won fair lady. (proverb)</i> [-courage] [+behaviour]	- lacking courage (R: <i>cine nu riscă, nu câștigă</i>)
(15) <i>He fainted because of high fever.</i> [+illness] [+physical state]	- to lose consciousness unexpectedly (R: <i>a leșina</i>)

In the sentences above, the major semantic classes, essential for the meaningful relations between the terms in grammatical constructions, to which *faint* may belong are: a) characteristics in sentences 10, 11 states (usually the result of some activity or event) in sentence 1, 3, 4, 5, 7. The syntactic functions of *faint* are that of complement in sentences 9, 11, subject in sentences 10, 12, 14, and predicate in sentence 15. The meaning and the

use of *faint* in a cleft sentence 12, and in a comparative clause 11 make it even more different from its uses in other contexts.

Within this pair, *faint/ feint*, conversion can be mentioned with *feint*. Consider the sentences:

<p>(16) <i>With a feint, Chuck knocked down his two opponents.</i></p> <p>[+falsity] [+violence]</p>	<p>- false attack (R: <i>fentă, atac simulat</i>)</p>
<p>(17) <i>First Chuck feinted with his left hand.</i></p> <p>[+activity] [+violence] [+misleading]</p>	<p>- pretended to attack (R: <i>simulează un atac, s-a făcut că atacă</i>)</p>

In these sentences *feint* is a noun, belonging to the class of entities (in sentence 16), meaning false attack or blow with the purpose of drawing the enemy's attention away from the real danger, and a verb, belonging to the class of activities (in sentence 17), meaning to pretend to hit with one hand but to use the other. Its syntactic functions are adjunct of manner represented by a PP and predicate represented by the VP whose head is an intransitive verb, respectively.

The criterion most frequently applied was the misleading spelling with pairs or adjoinment series such as: **allude, elude; afflict, inflict; collide, collided; collision, collusion; fierce, fiery; flatter, flutter; lop, lope; migrate, emigrate; parched, perched; ramble, rumble; assure, ensure, insure; delude, deluge, delusion**, etc. With most of them, the components may have nothing to do with one another concerning their meanings and uses in context. For example, the common feature of the adjectives making up the pair **fierce, fiery** is that both belong to the semantic class of characteristics and are marked [\pm abstract]. Nevertheless, the distinctive feature is [+animate] with the former, and [-animate] with the latter. Moreover, they differ in terms of collocability and sentence patterning, although they may partially share the semantic feature [+anger]. What distinguished them in such cases is that *fierce* is marked [+violence]. Consider the sentences:

(18) <i>After that decision, a fierce attack on the government policy followed.</i> [+violence]	- violent (R: <i>îndârjit, înverșunat</i>)
(19) <i>That odd justice aroused fierce resentment.</i> [+anger]	- very strong emotions (R: <i>înverșunat, pățimaș</i>)
(20) <i>The competition for job is fierce because of too much unemployment.</i> [+struggle]	- very severe (R: <i>competiție strânsă</i>)
(21) <i>A fierce wind was blowing and prevented them from going on their way.</i> [+obstacle]	- terrible (R: <i>cumplit</i>)
(22.a) <i>He had a fierce look on his face.</i> [+anger]	- very angry (R: <i>cumplit, plin de mânie</i>)
(22.b) <i>He turned round looking fierce.</i> [+fright]	- very frightening (R: <i>fioros, cumplit</i>)
(23) <i>It was raining something fierce all day long yesterday.</i> [+intensity]	- more heavily than usual (R: <i>mai tare decât de obicei</i>)
(24) <i>He used to have a fiery temper.</i> [+impulsiveness]	- becoming angry very quickly (R: <i>irascibil</i>)
(25) <i>He delivered a fiery speech.</i> [+resultative] [+purpose]	- showing or encouraging anger (R: <i>înflăcărat</i>)

As it is obvious in the sentence above, *fierce* is [+abstract] in sentences 18-20, and [-abstract] in sentences 21, 22 and 23. Due to its mark, [+violence], *fierce* covers the whole range of strong feelings from “very angry” to “terrible”. Grammatically, its most frequent occurrences are in complement (20, 22b) and attributive (18-22a) positions. It usually comes after copulative verbs of seeming and appearing (22b), or after *be* (20). It occurs as subject position (in 18 and 21), and in DO position (19, 22a). Its adverbial function (23) is specific to informal English.

Unlike *fierce* which occurs in predicative position, besides its attributive occurrence in collocations, the adjective *fiery* occurs only in collocations (24, 25) in DO position.

Pairing based on affixation was also prevailing, including such pairs as **contention, contentment** – [+abstraction], [+formal], both belonging to the class of entities. The former has the feature [+attitude], whereas the latter is marked [+feeling].

Compare:

<p>(26.a) <i>They firmly opposed that contention.</i> [+opinion]</p> <p>(26.b) <i>It was his contention that the plan would never have been successful if his colleagues hadn't helped him.</i> [+opinion] [+assertion]</p>	<p>- opinion (R: <i>părerere</i>)</p> <p>- assertion that (R: <i>afirmații, părerere, spuneau că...</i>)</p>
<p>(27) <i>He was lying on the grass in obvious contentment.</i> [+modality] [+delight]</p>	<p>- satisfaction (R: <i>mulțumire</i>)</p>

It is worthwhile mentioning that the noun *contention*, also occurring with the meaning of dispute, arguing and competing as in the sentences:

<p>(28.a) <i>The result of the inquiry was the main point of contention.</i> [+dispute]</p> <p>(28.b) <i>This problem is no longer in contention.</i> [-dispute]</p>	<p>- dispute (R: <i>dispută, controversă</i>)</p>
--	--

Its frequency in propositional phrases is also obvious: it either takes the preposition of (e.g. *bone of contention*) or in (*in contention*), making up nominal collocations.

For Romanian learners of English, such adjoinment series if confusables as *barbarian, barbaric, barbarous* are sources of semantic ambiguities and translation errors, as well as in terms of collocability and sentence patterning, Their common

semantic feature is that they refer to uncivilized people, being marked [-civilized], [+cruelty]. However, the semantic difference is that **barbarian** belongs to the class of entities [-abstraction] and rarely to that of characteristics, whereas **barbaric** and **barbarous** belong only to the class of characteristics. Consider the sentences:

<p>(29.a) <i>Some barbarians come to live there long ago.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[-abstraction] [+human] [-civilized]</p> <p>(29.b) <i>It seemed to him that such words could be uttered only by barbarians.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[-abstraction] [+human] [-politeness]</p> <p>(29.c) <i>A barbarian tribe lived in that place.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[-abstraction] [+human] [-civilized]</p>	<p>- savage, wild people not knowing civilization (R: <i>barbar</i>)</p> <p>- a person who does not show respect for education (R: <i>persoană necivilizată</i>)</p> <p>- uncivilized people (R: <i>de barbari</i>)</p>
<p>(30) <i>It was reported to have been a barbaric act of terrorism.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[±abstraction] [+cruelty]</p>	<p>- cruel (R: <i>barbar, cumplit</i>)</p>
<p>(31) <i>I couldn't believe my eyes on seeing such barbaric clothes.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[-abstraction] [+adornment]</p>	<p>- crudely rich (R: <i>bestial, neşlefuit, de prost gust</i>)</p>
<p>(32) <i>The land was beautiful but the villagers were savage barbarous people.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">[-abstraction] [+human] [-civilized]</p>	<p>- shockingly uncivilized (R: <i>necivilizat, barbar</i>)</p>
<p>(33) <i>The prisoner was shocked to have been given such a barbarous treatment.</i></p>	<p>- extremely cruel (R: <i>barbar, cumplit</i>)</p>

[-abstraction]	
[+behaviour]	
[+cruelty]	

(34) <i>He couldn't have a wink of sleep because of the wild barbarous music.</i>	- extremely noisy (R: <i>cumplit, îngrozitor</i>)
[-abstraction]	
[+noise]	
(35) <i>Their language sounded so barbarous to my ears.</i>	- not accepting the classical standard (R: <i>plin de barbarisme/ cuvinte îngrozitoare, care sună îngrozitor</i>)
[-abstraction]	
[-acceptability]	

The noun **barbarian** is the general word, but the collocations are troublesome especially in translation in that **barbarian** is [+human], whereas **barbaric** and **barbarous** are [±animate], occurring in collocations such as **barbaric act/ noise/ clothes**, but **barbarous people/ treatment/ music/ language**. Another distinctive feature is that **barbaric** and *barbarous* are often marked for modality and have metaphorical meanings. Grammatically, the frequency of occurrence with the last two adjectives is on complement position after the copulative verb be. However, they also occur in attributive position, as DOs, and with adverbial function (reason, cause). It is only the adjective **barbarous** that occurs in passivals (35).

As far as the register indications are concerned, all the nouns belonging to a series of confusables can be marked [+formal]. Consider the following sentences in which the confusables **esteem, estimate, estimation** occur:

(36) <i>The organization of that syposium showed our esteem towards the distinguished linguist.</i>	- respect towards someone (R: <i>apreciere, stimă, considerație</i>)
[+formal]	
[+appreciation]	

(37.a) <i>Our estimate of the costs were wrong.</i> [+formal] [+evaluation]	
(37.b) <i>At a rough estimate there were about 12,000 people on the stadium.</i> [+evaluation]	- judgement of something (R: <i>apreciere, evaluare</i>)
(37.c) <i>The manager's estimate that the goods should be delivered before the end of May was correct.</i>	
(38) <i>In our estimation, this will bring about further problems.</i> [+evaluation]	- opinion (R: <i>apreciere, părere</i>)

The meaning of the three confusable nouns is entirely different, and the relations between the parts of the grammatical constructions and between the clause constituents obviously change from one context to another. The grammatical status of the three nouns is also different: the noun *esteem* takes the preposition towards, and the noun *estimate* takes both the preposition of (indicating that what follows is linked with what has preceded), and the conjunction that (marking a wh-clause which occurs at Q), whereas the noun *estimation* does not take any. The function of the noun *esteem*, marked [+abstraction], meaning respect towards someone, is that of DO, whereas the functions of the noun *estimate* [+abstraction], +of or +that, meaning judgment of something, are those of subject (37.a) and adjunct of manner expressed by the collocational PP *at a rough estimate* which takes front position for emphasis (37.b). The meaningful relation between the possessive determiner our and the noun *estimate* is not that of possession, but that of judgment made by someone as in context 37c, where, grammatically, semantically and in terms of register, it requires the subjunctive mood. There is one similarity in terms of grammar, i.e., the function of adjunct represented by PP with the nouns *estimate* (37.b) and *estimation* (38).

These three troublesome nouns are most often confused by Romanian learners of English.

Consequently, the analysis of the meaningful relations between the constituents of grammatical constructions proves that it is very important to know the semantic

relations between words in order to make the right word and the right grammatical construction match an adequate context.

All these aspects of the corpus-based analysis are relevant for the semantic and grammatical behaviour of the confusables that are real sources of semantic ambiguities and translation errors, on the one hand, and of ungrammaticality, on the other.

References

- Bantaş, A., E. Croitoru, 1998. *Didactics of Translation*, Bucharest: Teora.
- Croitoru, E., F. Popescu, G. Dima 1996. *Tests for Translating*, 1, Brăila: Evrika!
- Croitoru E. 1996. *Interpretation and Translation*, Galați: Porto-Franco.
- Croitoru E., F. Popescu, G. Dima 1998. *Tests for Translating*, 2, Brăila: Evrika!
- Croitoru, E. (coord.) 2004. *English through Translations*, Galați: Editura Fundației Universitare “Dunărea de Jos” Galați
- Croitoru, E., 2004. *Confusables as Translation Traps*, Iași: European Institute Publishing House.
- Dima, Gabriela 2003. *Outlines of English Semantics*, Galați: Editura Fundației Universitare “Dunărea de Jos” Galați
- Leech, Geoffrey N. 1981. *Semantics*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2nd edition.
- Leech, Geoffrey N. 1989. *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*, London: Longman.
- Nida, E.A. 1996. *The Sociolinguistics of Interlingual Communication*, Collection Traductologie, Bruxelles: Editions du Hazard.
- Stubbs, M., 2001. *Words and Phrases. Corpus Linguistics of Lexical Semantics*, Blackwell Publishers.
- Teubert, W., 1999. *Corpus Linguistics: A Partisan View*, http://solaris3.ids-mannheim.de/ijcl/teubert_cl.html

Elena CROITORU

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH: 27. 11.1949, GALAȚI

ADDRESS: Mazepa II, Romana Street, no. 3, bl. D3 A, ap. 51, Galați;

TELEPHONE : fix - 004/0236/ 434560; mobile - 0723500626

E-MAIL : elena_croitoru@yahoo.com

NATIONALITY: Romanian

OCCUPATION/INSTITUTION: full professor “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, Faculty of Letters and Theology, the Department of English Language and Literature