

Underspecified Word Meaning, Pragmatics and the Lexicon

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Abstract:

According to some recent views, a word's meaning is 'semantically underspecified': it does not specify a concept/sense which can contribute directly to truth conditions, but is either too rich or too meagre and has to be transformed in some way before it can express a specific semantic content. Focussing on the phenomenon of polysemy, I discuss the underspecification options on offer and find problems with all of them.

I propose a different sort of account, one which requires making a distinction between the kind of lexicon that features in a narrow construal of language (I-language, as in the generative grammar tradition) and the lexicon of the broader public language system, a repository of communicative devices, which are both inputs to and outputs of the inferential pragmatic system.