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Combining colour-related terms with nouns

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Philosophical semantics has a recent tradition of talking about colour adjectives. Witness the heated debates about whether russet leaves painted green can properly be called 'green' in certain contexts (see Travis 1997, Predelli 2005). Those examples are invoked in the debate between contextualists and defenders of more conservative truth-conditional semantics. Philosophical semantics has also shown interest in the combination of adjectives and nouns, mostly one adjective and one noun. To our knowledge, scarcely any attention has been paid to complex combinations involving colour(-related) terms.

We say 'terms' because we are sometimes unsure whether they are adjectives or nouns. We say 'colour-related' because we also want to look at words that are not strictly speaking colour terms, but adjectives like *dark*, *pale*, or *bright*. Our aim in this exploratory paper is to consider what happens when several adjectives or nouns are combined, one of which at least is a colour(-related) term.

What first got our attention was the following observation. In sentences like
The coat is red

We've painted the leaves green,

everyone assumes that *red* is an adjective, and we see no reason to disagree. Note however that when *red* is itself suitably modified, we tend rather to get the following:

The Brandrood variety is a darker red

We've painted those other leaves a darker green.

In other words, the predicative complement is now unambiguously headed by the noun *red*. All sorts of questions arise from this observation, but they are mainly questions for the grammarian or syntactician. In this paper, we want to be looking at some of the semantic facts about collocations of colour-related terms, so we will not be further concerned with their grammar here. Note, however, that lexical category is not irrelevant to the determination of the semantics, witness a recent paper by Kennedy & McNally (2010), in which they offer very different semantics for the noun *green* and for the adjective.

Let us take a two-word collocation like *dark green* and place it in the modifier position to a noun, say *room*. The sparse linguistic literature on this topic almost systematically treats strings like <*bright/dark/etc.* + colour term> as compound adjectives (Bauer & Huddleston 2002: 1658; Conti 2007: 134). But we make out *three* possible readings of a phrase like *a dark green room*:

1. A room that is both dark and green: a [dark] [green] room
2. A green room that is dark: a dark [green room]
3. A room that is dark-green: a [dark green] room

Reading 3 is the only one in which *dark(-)green* is a compound. In that case, the room is said to be some *particular* dark shade of green. Not every dark shade of green counts as dark-green. On the second reading, *green* and *room* form a sort of (nonce) compound (the way that *green pepper* can be understood to form a compound). In a case like this the meanings of *dark* and *green* do not interact, and we will have no more to say about it. The reading we are most interested in is the apparently simple reading 1. We believe that determining the proposition expressed by the utterance of a sentence containing the phrase so interpreted is trickier than it looks.

Our aim in the following will chiefly be to show some difficulties involved in trying to find a *single* account capable of explaining a greater variety of examples than are usually

attended to. To show this, we'll begin with ordinary examples involving a single colour adjective modifying a noun, and will then proceed to more complex cases:

(1) This is a green room

As is now well-known, one can barely accept that an utterance of (1) just means that the location being pointed at is both a room and green. Quite a few people have argued, convincingly we believe, that there is a way for the room to be green and that this is part of what is said by an utterance of (1) (e.g. Lahav 1989; Reimer 2002; Recanati 2004, ch. 9, 2010, ch. 2). In the case at hand, the room would not normally be called 'green' if, say, the interior (some invisible part) of its walls was made of green material (though some sufficiently exotic context might force this interpretation).

There are several ways of accounting for this additional meaning. One can say that the apparent context-dependence of *green room* results from the semantics of the adjective *green* when combined with an N, namely "green for an N". A tentative formulation of this can be found in Fodor (1998, fn. 8). Somehow, then, adjectives have a sort of indexical component. Such a theory has the advantage of preserving (some version of) the Principle of Compositionality (see Siebel 2000). One can also be more pragmatically-minded about it and say that this additional meaning is a 'free pragmatic enrichment' of the truth-conditions of the utterance (Recanati 2004, 2010; Reimer 2002 defends a similar thesis, though not in those terms). This comes about as a result of the meaning of *green* being 'modulated' in context. In some particular context, one might take the proposition expressed by (1) to be something like: "the location pointed at is a room (the surface of) whose walls are green". Interestingly, this account is compatible with the Principle of Compositionality if 'what gets composed' is the *modulated* meanings of word-tokens, not the conventional meanings of the word-types (cf. Recanati 2010). We will not adjudicate between these two accounts here.

Now take:

(2) This is a dark room

Presumably the same sort of reasoning applies here. There is a way for the room to be dark and this affects the applicability of the NP to a referent and, consequently, the truth-conditions of the utterance. In some particular context, this could express the proposition that "the location pointed at is a room with some substantial proportion of the three-dimensional space it contains plunged in darkness".

We are simply suggesting that those propositions can possibly be expressed in some appropriate contexts. We take it in any case that it is clear that greenness and darkness apply differently to the room in (1) and (2). On the chosen interpretation, what it takes for the room in (1) to be green is that its walls should be green. On the chosen interpretation, what it takes for the room in (2) to be dark is that the space between the walls (and between floor and ceiling) should be dark, never mind whether the walls are actually painted some light or bright colour.

In most accounts we have come across (Lahav, Fodor, Siebel, Reimer, Recanati), be they semantically or pragmatically oriented, the part of the collocation whose meaning is assumed to be 'adjusted' is the adjective, not the noun. Our question is whether such an account can be generalised. Consider the following, more complex, example:

(3) Chatchai is tall and slim for his age, with **dark brown hair and eyes**, and speaks broken English. (BNC K4M)

For the time being, let us pay no attention to *dark*. We're leaving that for our next example. Consider *brown*: it modifies both *hair* and *eyes*. But presumably, in an ordinary, 'non-exotic'

context, the manner in which hair is brown differs from the manner in which eyes are brown. For eyes to be brown, the iris — the centre of the visible part of the eye — must be predominantly brown (with the exception of the pupil at *its* centre). In contrast, hair whose “centre” were brown would presumably not be called ‘brown hair’: hair is brown if most of the surface of each hair is brown. This suggests that, should we have separate utterances of (4) and (5), we’d say the adjective in them is modulated differently:

(4) Chatchai has got brown hair.

(5) Chatchai has got brown eyes.

The problem with (3) is that there’s only one token of *brown*. Can it be made to carry both modulations? That seems impossible since they are not mutually compatible. What other solutions are available? We see two.

(i) Logically speaking, the modulation could be carried by the ‘other’ in the collocation, namely the nouns, instead. One would therefore suggest that *brown hair and eyes* means something like “brown surface of each hair and irises”. This hardly seems promising. Here’s a further reason why such an account is unlikely to get off the ground. Take an utterance of:

(6) A dark green room,

which occurs as the caption to the picture below:



As far as we can judge — what really matters is that the description that follows be possible, not that it be accurate in this case — the room is said to be green because its walls are greenish, and it is said to be dark because quite a bit of it is plunged in darkness. On one possible description of the meaning of the caption, the property *darkness* is attributed to the room *qua* 3-D space, while *greenness* is attributed to the room *qua* sides of a 3-D space. Thus, if we wanted to say it’s the meaning of *room* that gets modulated, that meaning would have to simultaneously accommodate the two specifications just given. However, since neither of them includes the other, these meanings are incompatible. Saying that *room* in (6) just means “the walls of the room” — the right interpretation for the combination with *dark* being secured via a metonymy, with the walls going proxy for “the room as a whole” — would be to commit the same mistake Geoff Nunberg committed when he first analysed examples like *I am parked out back*. Nunberg rightly identified a metonymy, but thought the subject carried it. If the subject carries the metonymy, then it refers to the speaker’s car, and one should be able

to say such things as *I'm parked out back and may not start*. One can't (see Nunberg 1995 for details). Likewise in (6). If *room* means "the walls of the room", then we should be able to say things like (7) but not (8). Actually, just the opposite is true:

(7) *The room is dark green and is 8 inches thick on average.

(8) She sat in the middle of a room that had just been painted green.

So much for this attempt.

- (ii) The second option consists in saying that *brown hair and eyes* in (3) contains an ellipsis, concealing a syntactic structure that is actually *brown hair and brown eyes*. Then, assuming something like the 'rule-to-rule hypothesis' (cf. Szabó 2007), there are two *browns* (or one *brown* and one trace), each of which can be associated with a different meaning adjustment. This means that ellipsis preserves the viability of both a Fodorian or a modulation-based approach. However, the ellipsis account should not be accepted without reservations: it seems that when we process the sentence online we only process *brown* once, its meaning being (temporarily?) stripped down to just its conventional meaning to capture what all its tokens have in common, i.e. 'brownness'. If one feels that the truth-conditions of the utterance should somehow match its processing, then the Fodorian account is in trouble, since the one token of *brown* would have the inconsistent meaning "brown for hair and eyes". Maybe the modulation account can fare better, because, being a pragmatic process, it can distribute enrichments across the whole collocation (i.e. after *hair* and *eyes* have been processed). Naturally, this cannot be taken for granted and would have to be worked out in detail. Interestingly, actual online processing is not inimical to a *Minimalist* account of the collocation, one that assumes that *brown* is not enriched. This is the theory we said at the outset was to be rejected. Maybe it still has some life in itself.

Let us now bring together the various strands of our enquiry.

As far as we can see, no single account emerges as being clearly applicable across the board. Cases like (3) are probably trickiest. Either some ellipsis must be posited (and then both a Fodorian and a modulation-based account are possible), or analysis should stick closer to actual processing (in which case the Fodorian option is excluded, modulation *may* work, and Minimalism is a contender). Cases like (6) are less tricky, as they appear to be amenable to a Fodorian or a modulation account, provided it is the meaning of the adjectives that is adjusted, not that of the noun. The fact that *dark green room* cannot be short for *dark room and green room* is therefore not a problem.

In this abstract, we've barely touched upon which of the two main contenders we recognised — the Fodorian and the modulation-based approach — fares better. That is something we'll talk about at greater length in our presentation, just as we'll also have something to say about other tough complex cases like *a thick readable book*.

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