



Onomasiological salience - a well-entrenched concept

Dirk Geeraerts



KU Leuven

Quantitative Lexicology and Variational Linguistics

What are we talking about?

the two concepts that constitute the focus of the present theme session, viz. entrenchment and conventionalization, need to be scrutinized more closely; I will argue that

1° entrenchment should not be seen in terms of raw frequency

2° entrenchment should not be seen in psychological terms only

What kind of talk is this?

the simple purpose of this talk is **conceptual analysis and clarification**, not descriptive illustration, empirical falsification, or methodological development

it will however repeatedly refer to the work done by the QLVL team in Leuven in the wake of Geeraerts, Grondelaers & Bakema 1994, *The Structure of Lexical Variation* (Mouton de Gruyter)

Why have a closer look at entrenchment?

the notion of entrenchment, as used by Langacker 1987: 59,
basically equals **frequency of occurrence**,
but raw frequency is an unsophisticated and misleading measure
of semantic and sociolinguistic effects

how can we refine the notion of entrenchment?

Why do raw frequencies amount to zero?



Why do raw frequencies amount to zero?

there are many colourful parasols in China ...

but what does it mean?

- that the Chinese have an extraordinary (subjective or objective) need for protection against the sun?
- that the Chinese prefer parasols over other forms of skin protection?
- that they prefer colorful parasols over dark or even monochrome ones?

Why do raw frequencies amount to zero?

to answer such questions, we need to give up a reliance on raw frequencies, and study **relative frequencies**:

of the use of sun protection in China

of the use of parasols

of the use of colourful parasols

but relative with regard to what?

implicitly, there is a double perspective:

Why do raw frequencies amount to zero?

relative frequency of one **type of behaviour** w.r.t. another:
of the use of parasols versus other forms of skin protection
of the use of colourful parasols versus other kinds of parasols

relative frequency within one **behavioural group** w.r.t. other:
China versus other countries, gender, age ...
for instance:

Why do raw frequencies amount to zero?



What does this have to do with language?

in our example we have ...

a function to be achieved:

a need for protection against the sun

different tools for doing so:

parasols versus hats

different forms of one tool:

parasols in various colours & shapes

What does this have to do with language?

in language we have ...

a function to be achieved:

a need for communicating about certain things

different tools for doing so:

different concepts referring to those things

different forms of one tool:

different words for a given concept

What does this have to do with language?

in language we have ...

a function to be achieved:

a need for communicating about certain **things**

different tools for doing so:

different **concepts** referring to those things

different forms of one tool:

different **words** for a given concept

What does this have to do with language?

so, if we find a lot of instances of **station wagon** in a corpus, what does this raw frequency mean?

on the level of things, that this is a corpus of texts on transportation?

on the level of concepts, that the texts refer to motor vehicles on a fairly specific level, rather than by a more general term like **car**?

on the level of words, that the corpus prefers **station wagon** over synonymous terms like **station car** or **estate**?

How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?

thing

thing

thing

concept

concept

concept

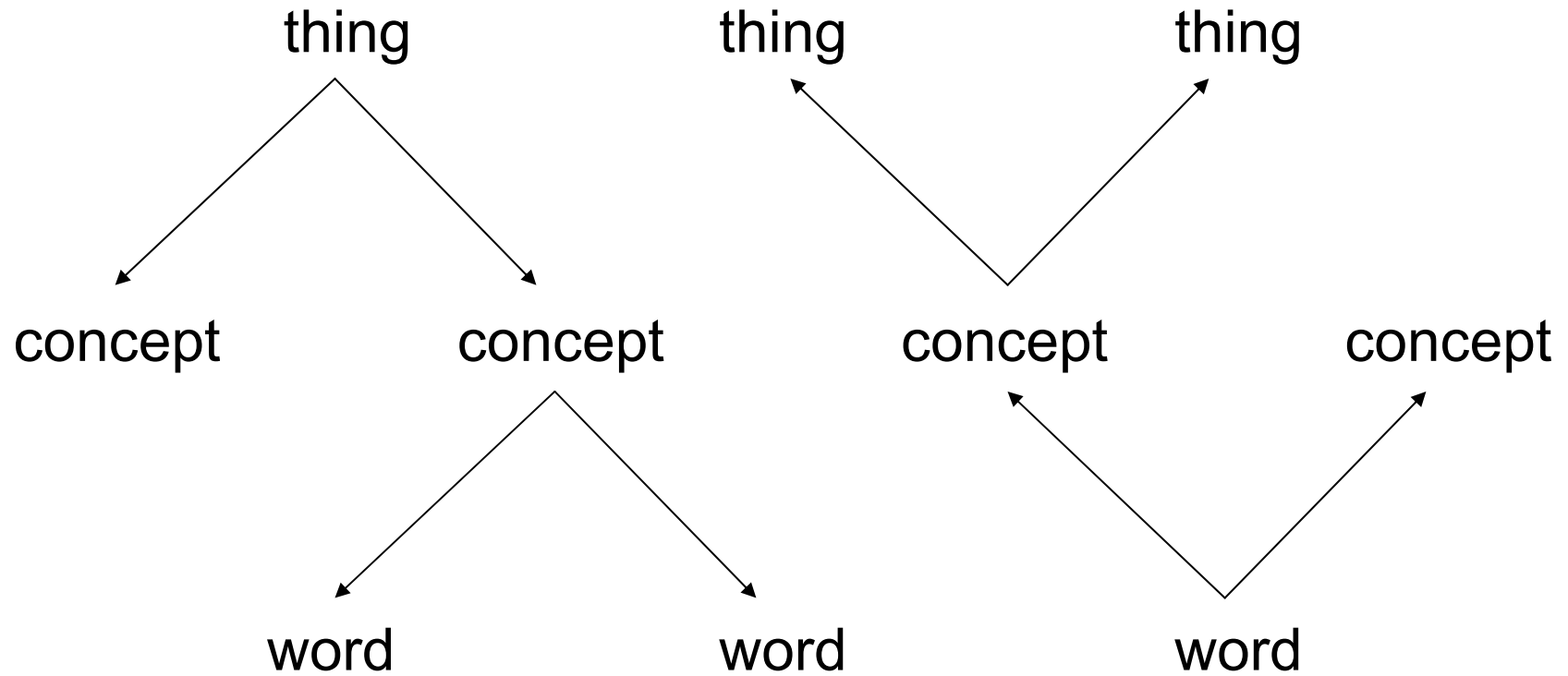
concept

word

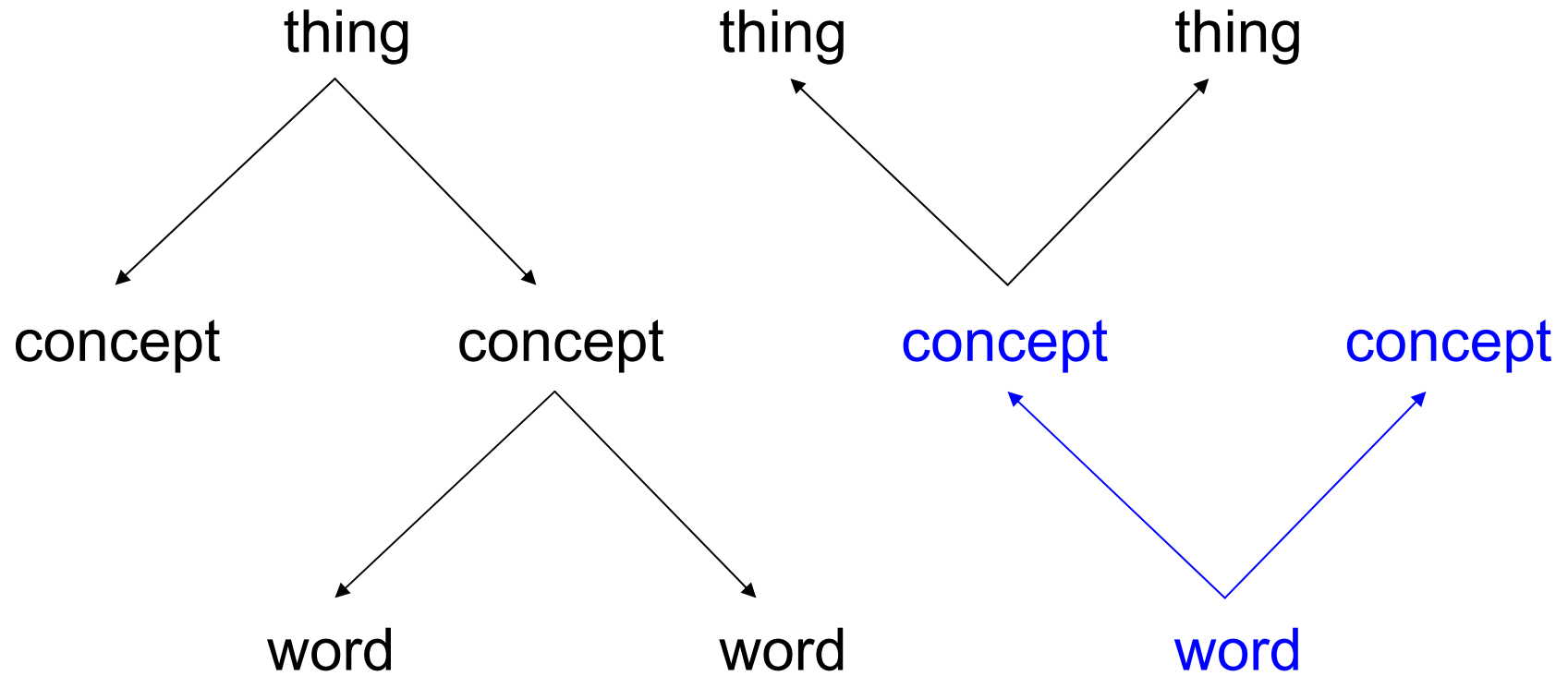
word

word

How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?



How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?



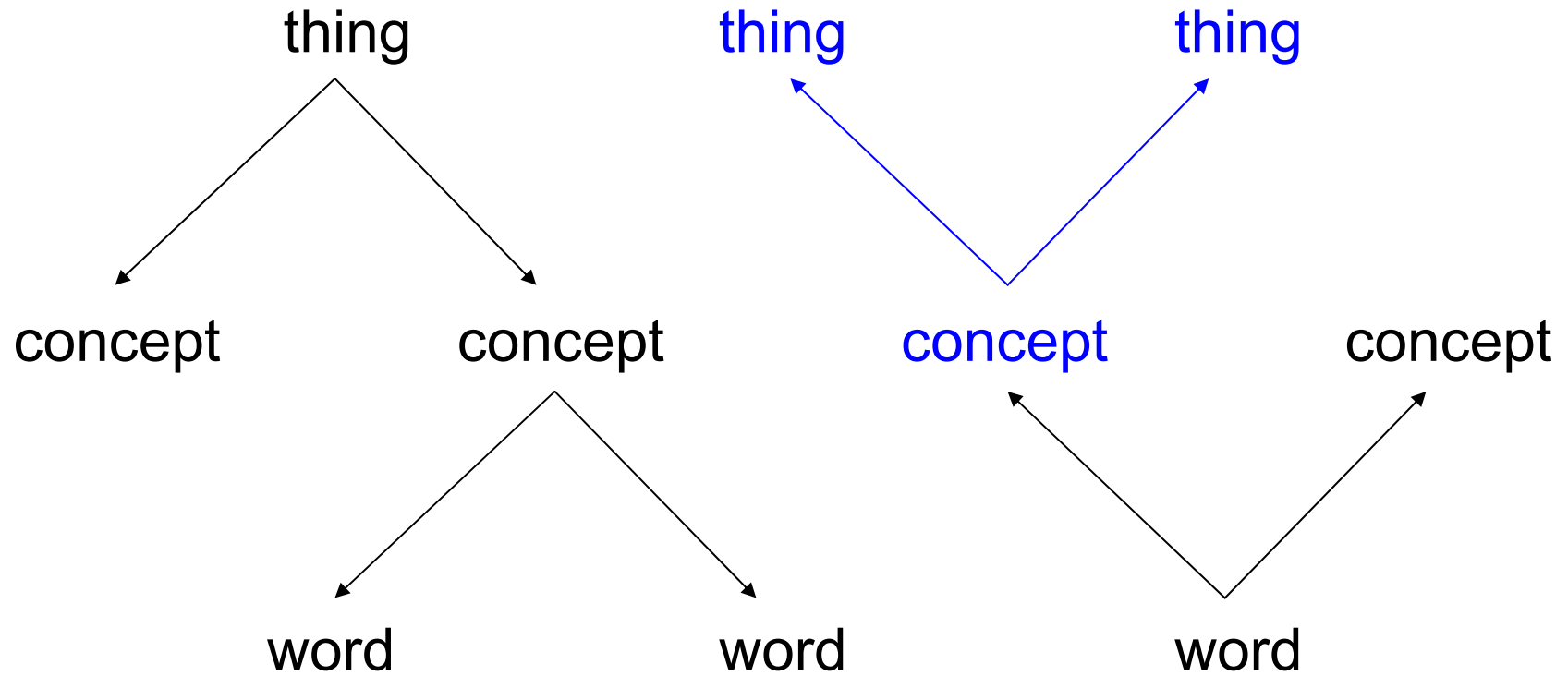
How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?

semasiological salience involving polysemy

i.e. some meanings are more central (in terms of frequency, or in terms of semantic coherence) to a word than others

→ a traditional recognition, rediscovered by cognitive linguistics in the form of radial sets and network models of meaning

How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?



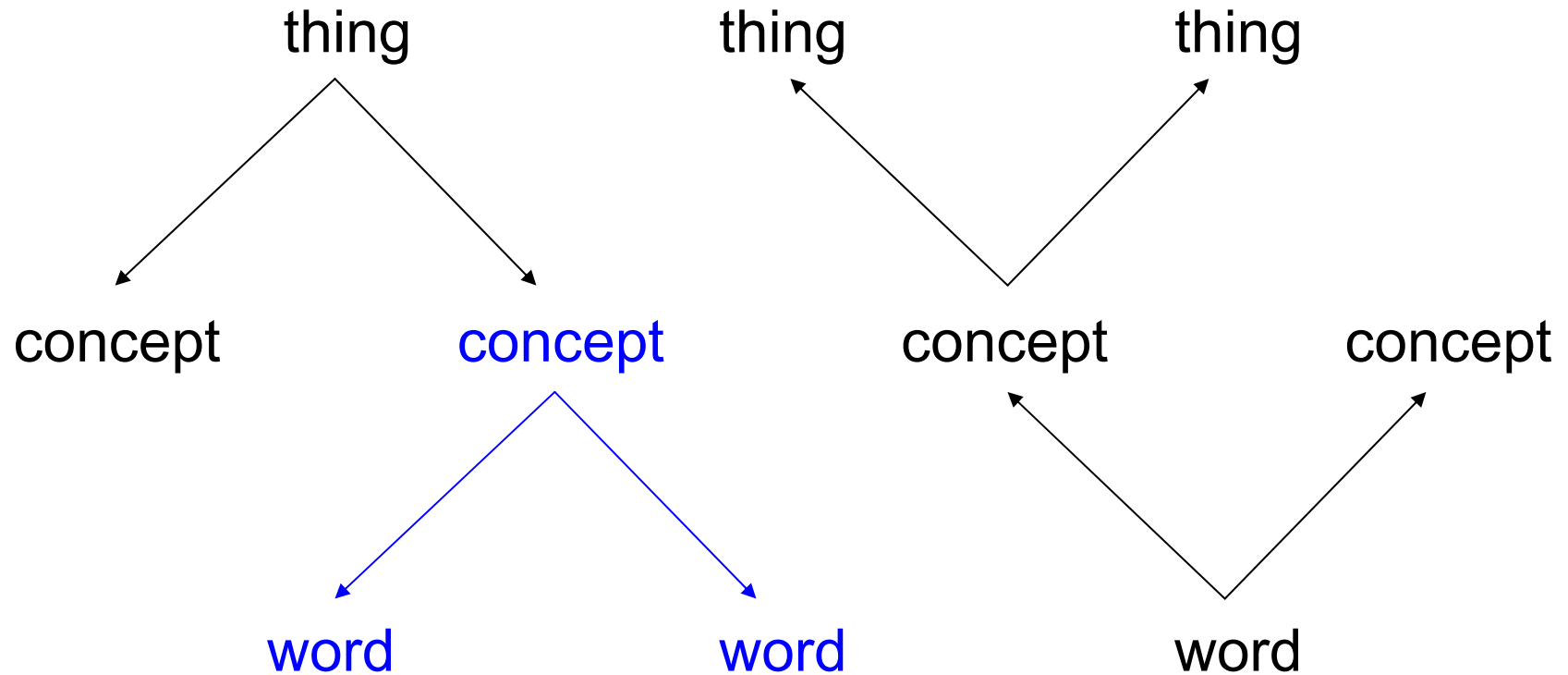
How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?

semasiological salience involving (referential) prototypicality

i.e. some members of a category are more central (in terms of frequency, or in terms of intracategorical coherence) than others

→ the original psycholinguistic discovery of Rosch et al., further developed (but largely independently) in psycholinguistic categorization research and cognitive linguistics

How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?



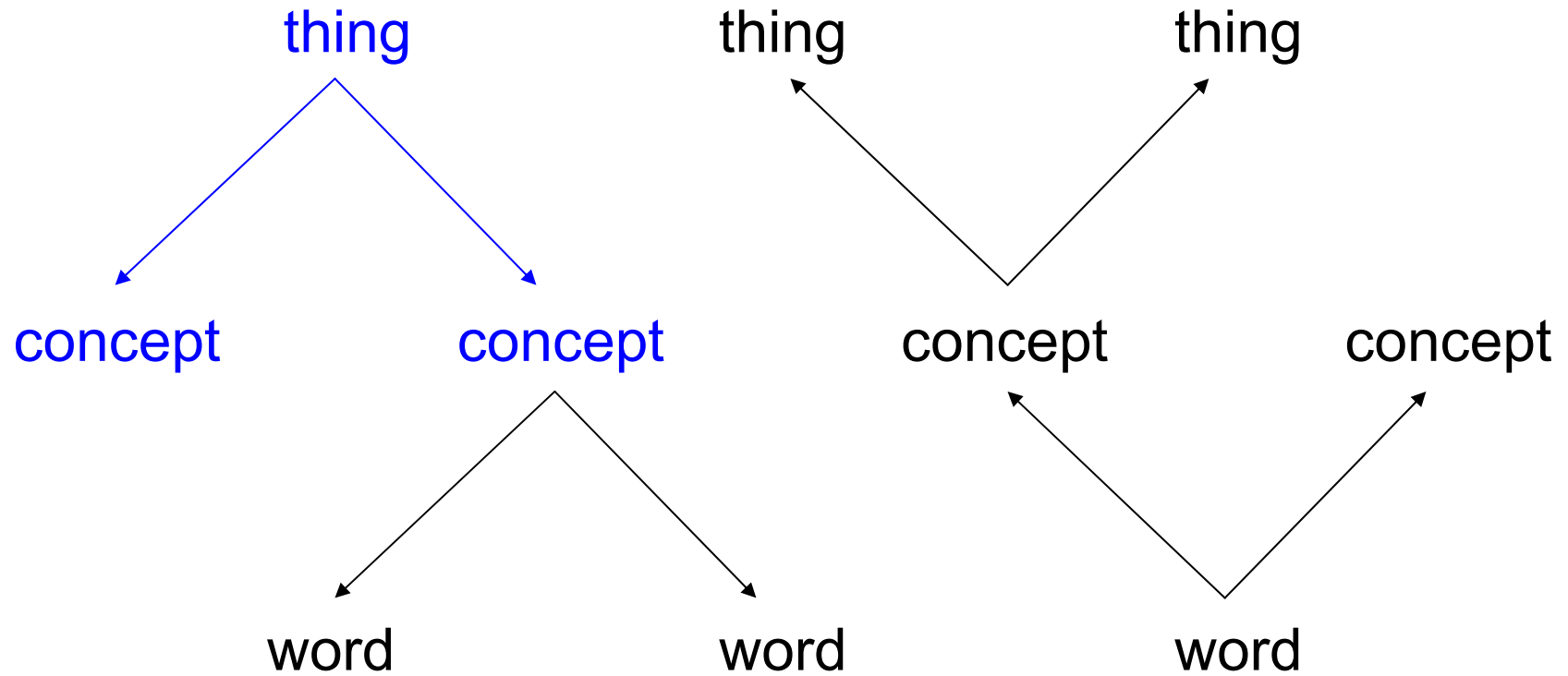
How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?

formal onomasiological salience involving synonyms

i.e. some lexicalizations of a given concept are relatively more frequent, in a given context, than others

→ the basis for a lexical sociolectometry that measures lexical distances among lects on the basis of the relative frequencies of competing synonyms (a 'profile-based approach')

How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?



How can we then refine the notion of entrenchment?

conceptual onomasiological salience involving near-synonyms

i.e. some conceptual construals of a given reality are relatively more frequent, in a given context, than others

→ a generalization of the notion of basic level concept: generalized onomasiological salience involves preferred ways of categorizing given chunks of reality

Is it that simple?

no, it is not: the kinds of analyses that you can and should do are influenced by positive, expansive factors, and negative, restrictive factors

expansions come from

- including features of category members
(cp. psycholinguistic research)
- focusing on texts rather than categories

Is it that simple?

restrictions come from

- the difficulty of independently describing the referential level

in the 1994 research on clothing terms, this is done by means of a componential description of the referents of the clothing items, based on pictorial materials in magazines, but this type of referential enrichment of the data is much more difficult when dealing with regular text corpora

Is it that simple?

restrictions come from

- the difficulty of distinguishing between concepts;

on the semasiological side, this blurs the distinction between levels

on the onomasiological side, it hampers the identification of
synonyms

Geeraerts, Dirk (1993). 'Vagueness's puzzles, polysemy's vagaries'. *Cognitive Linguistics* 4: 223-272.

Are these phenomena being studied?

examples from our QLV research lines

- **semasiological** salience

Geeraerts, Dirk (1997)

Diachronic Prototype Semantics.

A Contribution to Historical Lexicology.

Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Are these phenomena being studied?

examples from our QLV research lines

- **conceptual onomasiological** salience

Geeraerts, Dirk, Stefan Grondelaers and Peter Bakema (1994).
The Structure of Lexical Variation. Meaning, Naming, and
Context. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Are these phenomena being studied?

examples from our QLV research lines

- formal onomasiological salience

Geeraerts, Dirk, Stefan Grondelaers & Dirk Spielman (1999)
Convergentie en divergentie in de Nederlandse woordenschat.
Een onderzoek naar kleding- en voetbaltermen.
Amsterdam: Meertens Instituut.

Are these phenomena being studied?

examples from our QLVL research lines

- formal onomasiological salience

Speelman, Dirk, Stefan Grondelaers and Dirk Geeraerts (2003).

'Profile-based linguistic uniformity as a generic method for comparing language varieties'.

Computers and the Humanities 37: 317-337.

Why have a closer look at conventionalization?

in what sense could 'the interaction between entrenchment and conventionalization' be understood, now that we have a better insight in the notion of entrenchment?

two perspectives can be taken:

- entrenchment as a collective phenomenon
- entrenchment as an individual phenomenon

What if we take a collective perspective?

if we look at the entrenchment of linguistic behaviour x as a collective phenomenon (i.e. as a characteristic of the collective behaviour of a group of people),

then conventionalization is simply the **diachronic process that leads to a high degree of entrenchment** of x,

i.e. it equals a collective change in entrenchment in one of its many forms

What if we take a collective perspective?

examples from my own research: same as before

- **semasiological** changes of entrenchment

Geeraerts, Dirk (1997)

Diachronic Prototype Semantics.

A Contribution to Historical Lexicology.

Oxford: Clarendon Press.

What if we take a collective perspective?

examples from my own research

- **conceptual onomasiological** changes of entrenchment

Geeraerts, Dirk and Stefan Grondelaers (1995)

'Looking back at anger. Cultural traditions and metaphorical patterns'. In John Taylor and Robert E. MacLaury (eds.),

Language and the Construal of the World 153-180.

Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

What if we take a collective perspective?

examples from my own research

- **formal onomasiological** changes of entrenchment

Geeraerts, Dirk, Stefan Grondelaers & Dirk Speelman (1999)

Convergentie en divergentie in de Nederlandse woordenschat.

Een onderzoek naar kleding- en voetbaltermen.

Amsterdam: Meertens Instituut.

What if we take an individual perspective?

if you look at entrenchment as an individual phenomenon, i.e. as a characteristic of the speech habits of a single individual,

then the problem is how to describe the dialectic relationship between collective behaviour and individual behaviour

What if we take an individual perspective?

a graphical representation

Geeraerts, Dirk (2010).

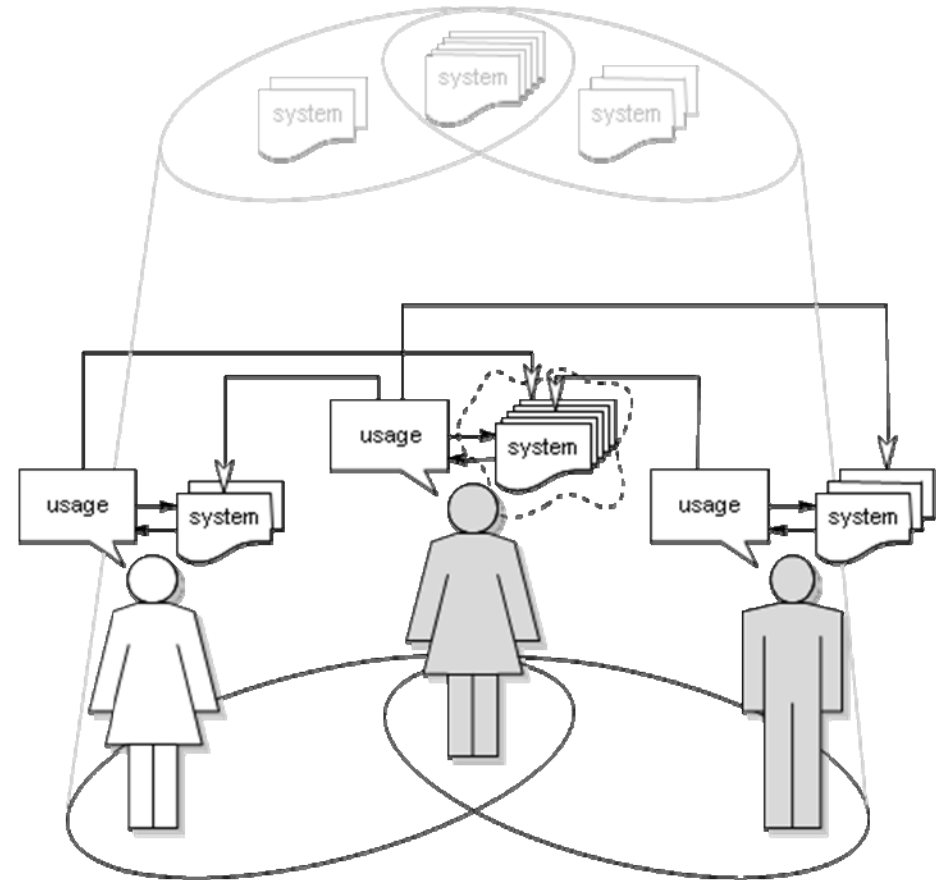
'Schmidt redux: How systematic is the linguistic system if variation is rampant?'

In Kasper Boye and Elisabeth Engeberg-Pedersen (eds.),
Language Usage and Language Structure 237-262.

Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

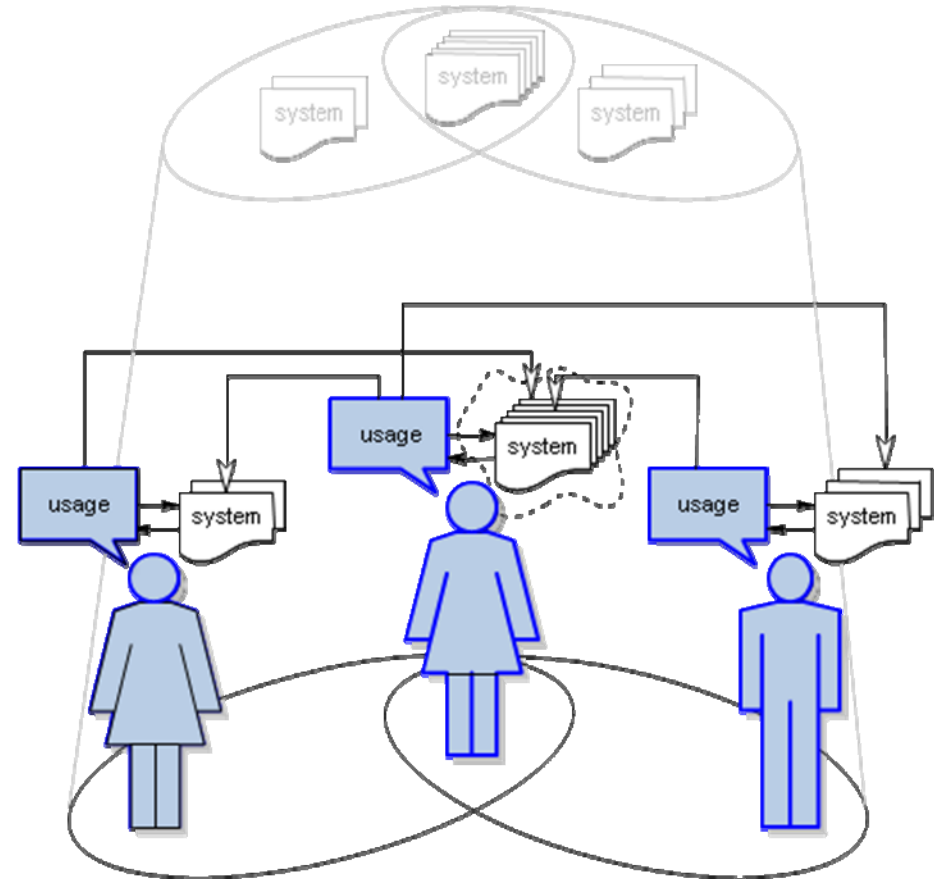
What if we take an individual perspective?

what is 'the system' in a usage-based conception of language?



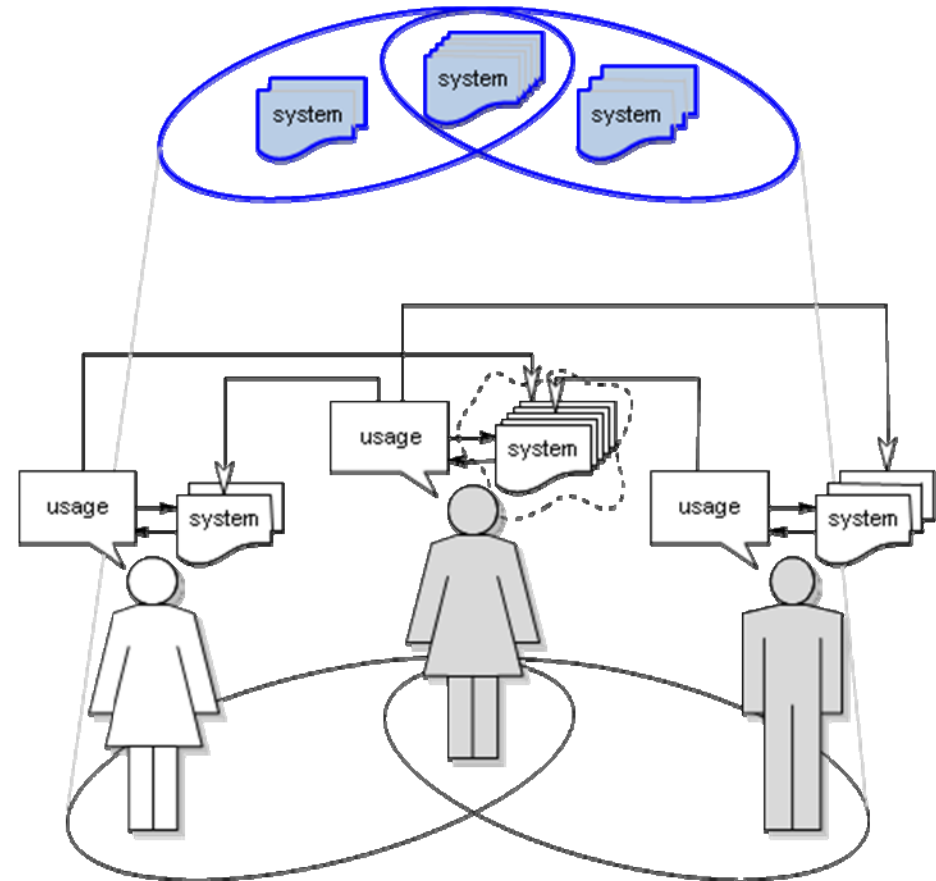
What if we take an individual perspective?

the primary fact of linguistics
is the behaviour
of the language users



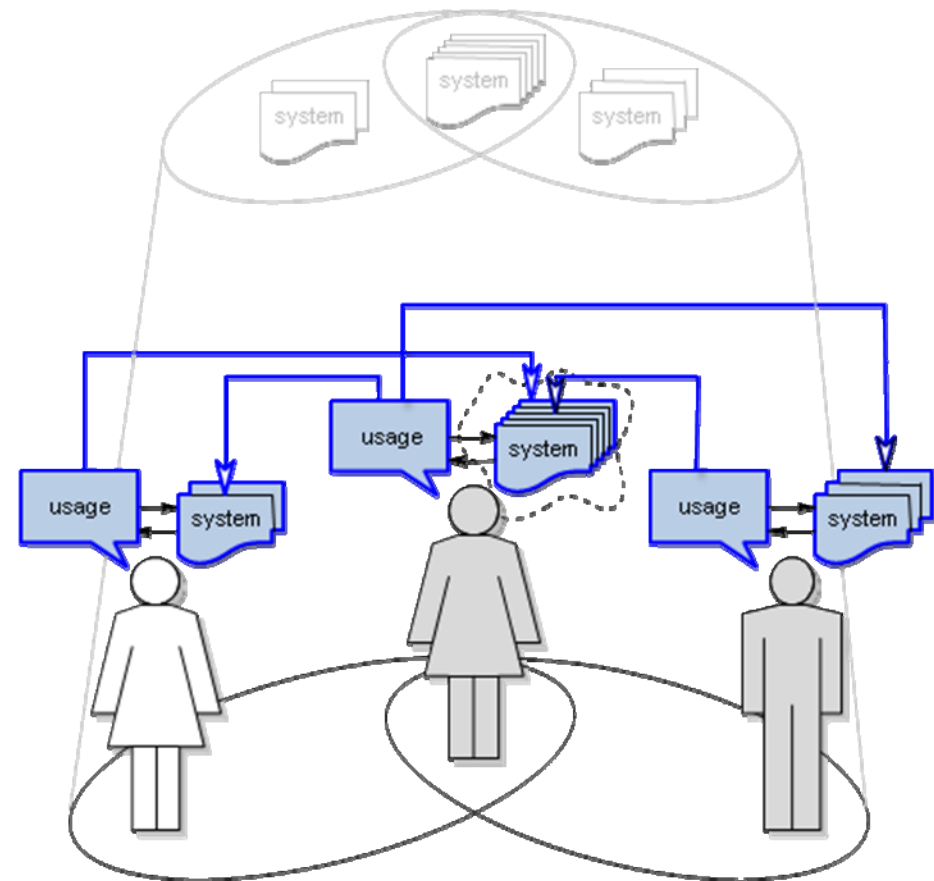
What if we take an individual perspective?

what we call 'the system'
is a secondary abstraction
over regularities
in the primary behavior



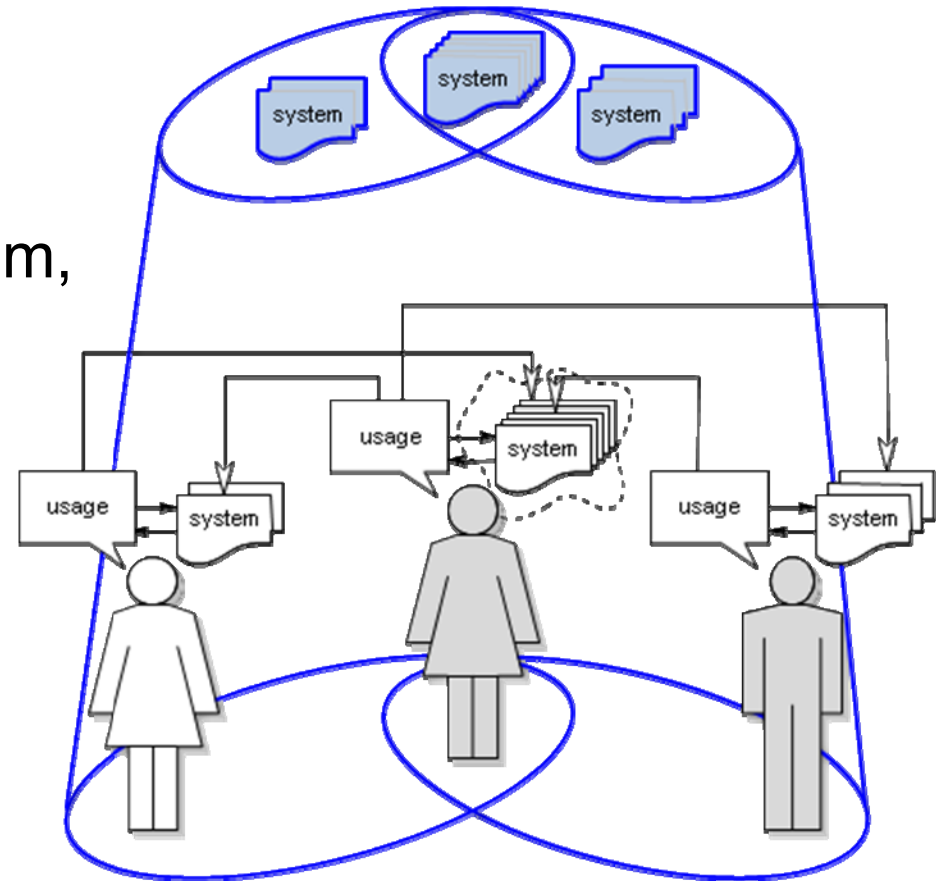
What if we take an individual perspective?

language users do not align with 'the system', they align with each other;
these alignments are necessarily incomplete



What if we take an individual perspective?

hence, lectal variation is an integral part of a usage-based conception of the linguistic system, i.e. we need **cognitive sociolinguistics**



What if we take an individual perspective?

charting this dialectic interaction of collective and individual entrenchment will be extremely complicated, but to get started, we can have a look at the way individual choices of categorization and lexicalization are made as a function of

- cognitive factors (like processing constraints)
- structural factors (like all kinds of entrenchment)
- lexical and situational factors

What if we take an individual perspective?

this approach is the inspiration for a lot of research using regression analysis for modelling linguistic behaviour

Grondelaers, Stefan, Dirk Geeraerts and Dirk Speelman (2007).
'A case for cognitive corpus linguistics'. In Monica Gonzalez-Marquez, Irene Mittelberg, Seana Coulson and Michael J. Spivey (eds.), *Methods in Cognitive Linguistics* 149-169.
Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

What can we conclude?

1° it is misleading to talk about the 'interaction' between entrenchment and conventionalization, because the two do not exist as clearly separate phenomena:
conventionalization is growing collective entrenchment,
and individual entrenchment is, dialectically, both the product and the instrument of collective entrenchment

What can we conclude?

2° it is misleading to define entrenchment (whether individual or collective) in terms of frequency of occurrence, because raw frequencies are vastly uninformative in terms of the categorization phenomena that interest us as cognitive linguists

thank you !

for further information:

<http://wwwling.arts.kuleuven.be/qlvl>

dirk.geeraerts@arts.kuleuven.be

