System, Norm, and Meaning

The article presents the distinction between *system* and *norm* and explains that it corresponds to the difference between possibility and tradition in a language. The origin of the distinction is described and examples of its application provided. The article then submits that a consistent application of the distinction entails that there are deviant uses of roots that are permitted by the system. This view is demonstrated on a small sample of prepositions of concomitance, in particular English *with*. Some methodological concerns are raised and answered in regard to the tolerance for deviant uses. The article concludes that an expression like *married with him* is analogous to an expression like *arrogantness* – deviant by the normal standard but in accordance with the system.

> Whereas the norm includes all traditional realisations in a language, the system is restricted to the functional oppositions, that is, to that which is distinctive in the technique of a language… (Coseriu 1992, 298; author's translation.)

The distinction between system and norm, which was first proposed in Coseriu (1952), suggests that a language cannot be characterised as a uniform structure that unambiguously prescribes and proscribes certain linguistic expressions. System and norm are different levels of linguistic organisation that correspond to different senses in which linguistic manifestations belong to a language. The norm is the established tradition and comprises what is normal and usual in a language. The system is the functional structure and comprises the oppositions that delimit the possibilities of a language. The system provides the speakers with the means to transcend, and possibly transform, normal language use. Speakers who use a language in a divergent manner are therefore not necessarily in violation of the system, although they will be in breach of the norm. For example, the sentence *I have a hunger* is possible and comprehensible in English (cf. *I have a headache, I have a sensation*), but it is not in accordance with the norm if the speaker wishes to express his sensation of hunger. In that case, the norm prescribes *I'm hungry*. The system permits more than is tolerated by the norm.

The distinction should not be entirely alien to contemporary linguistics. It strikes a note that I believe is intuitively understood and appreciated in many quarters of our discipline. Coseriu (1992, 293) himself remarks that proponents of generative grammar refer to a similar fact about linguistic structure with the notion of "degrees of grammaticality". One might add that it also bears a resemblance to the distinction between grammaticality and acceptability (Chomsky 1965), although such comparisons should not be drawn too far. The distinction between system and norm, however, is not in common use and is little known outside the circles where Coseriu's work already exerts an influence.

The purpose of the present article is to introduce the concepts of system and norm to a wider audience, to demonstrate their utility and to discuss their application in semantics. The next section places the concepts in the context of their inception and provides examples of how they apply to different phenomena. The remainder of the article is devoted to a matter that is scarcely treated in Coseriu's own work: how the distinction applies to the semantic interpretation of roots. For reasons that will be clear, roots are an interesting case where one consequence of the distinction is especially radical and revealing, namely that roots have deviant uses that are permitted by the system. I will propose that *married with him* is one such use of *with* in English.

Refining the Saussurian dichotomy

Coseriu's concepts of system and norm spring from the concern that Saussure's (1916) concepts of *langue* and *parole* are rather too coarse. As such, the concern is not original, and it did in fact unite many linguists in the decades following the publication of Saussure's *Course*. There were many proposals on how to improve the Saussurian concepts, put forward by scholars like Jespersen (1925), Bally (1926), Gardiner (1932), Bühler (1934), Brøndal (1937), Trubetzkoy (1939), Sechehaye (1940), Hjelmslev (1942, 1943), von Wartburg (1943), Martinet (1948), Møller (1949), and Flydal (1952). In this row of contributions, Coseriu's (1952) is the last, and it drew substantially on earlier work. One would be amiss not to mention the similarity with ideas of Trubetzkoy and Hjelmslev. While the distinctive phonemes of the system are his main concern, Trubetzkoy (1939, 42) recognises that the choice between variants may constitute a *norm* in itself, namely if the choice is socially relevant, such as is the case if only one variant is normal, whereas others are seen as regional, social, affectatious, or pathological deviations. Such deviant variants are permissible by the *system* but breach the strictures of the norm. Hjelmslev (1942) distinguishes between *schema*, language as pure form, *norm*, language as material form, and *usage*, language as the sum of habits. Roughly speaking, *schema* and *norm* correspond to Coseriu's *system*, and *usage* to Coseriu's *norm*. The main difference to Coseriu is that Hjelmslev separates the purely relational structure of language (schema) from the positive content of structure (norm), for example meanings and sounds.

From this historical perspective, system and norm divide *langue* into two parts: a *functional* part, comprising the distinctive invariants of a language, and a *traditional* part, comprising the normal, recurring variants of a language. In lack of such a distinction confusion arises as to where normal, recurring variants belong. Trubetzkoy, for instance, understands the abovementioned norm in regard to variants of phonemes as a norm of parole, so that these variants are, in fact, not part of langue at all. But it is a mistake, Coseriu argues, to relegate such variants to parole, since normal variants are representative of a language rather than of utterances. The concept of parole is better reserved for the purely momentary and occasional manifestations of language. Neither would it be appropriate to include them in the system, since normal variants are merely recurring units, not functionally distinctive ones (Coseriu 1952/1975, 56–64). Thus arises the need for an intermediary region, a region that lacks the structural properties of the system but retains its constancy. This region is the norm.

Coseriu (1952, 1970a, 1973, 1992, 2007) provides examples of the distinction from the fields of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicology. We shall look at some of his examples and also provide our own. The perhaps simplest application of the distinction is the one already mentioned, the difference between phonemes and their normal variants. For example, the phoneme /b/ in Spanish is [+ oral], [+ bilabial], and [+ voiced]. No other features are distinctive. The additional features [+ occlusive] and [+ fricative], one of which the phoneme would have when realised, merely define two normal variants that stand in complementary distribution (Coseriu 1992, 298f). It follows from Coseriu's description that the phoneme in principle could be realised as [+ trill], but that this would deviate from the norm.

In lexical morphology, the distinction corresponds to the difference between the productivity of word-formation, which is part of the system, and the inventory of established formations, which is part of the norm. In English, nominalising *-ness* is highly productive with few restrictions, but it does not attach to verbs or bound bases (Bauer et al. 2013, 245f). Thereby are **sayness* and **ducedness* excluded from the system. New formations such as *sayingness* and *introducedness*, on the other hand, are not. These are simply unfamiliar to the norm. Another illuminating divergence are formations that are disfavoured by the norm because of competing words: the only thing standing

in the way of *arrogantness* and *strongness* is *arrogance* and *strength*. While rare in use, they are still permitted by the system.[1]

Of particular interest for the purpose of the present article are applications of the distinction in semantics. The phenomenon of relevance here is traditional interpretations, i.e. conventional limitations of the possibilities inherent in the system. In many cases, the limitation affects the product of word-formation, so that it specifies a compositionally underdetermined meaning. Coseriu (2007, 272) cites the German compounds *Hauptmann* ('captain [rank]') and *Hauptstadt* ('capital'), which have the indicated senses in the norm. From the systemic point of view, however, they may just as well be interpreted as 'most important man' and 'most important city' in analogy with *Hauptsache* ('main matter'). We can add to Coseriu's examples the observation that the potential of the words becomes evident in certain other formations, for instance *Kulturhauptstadt* ('cultural capital'). In some cases, the cause of the limitation is an affective variation, such as in Bally's (1935) *croire en Dieu* ('believe in God') and *croire au diable* ('believe in the devil'). Custom has it that belief in a divine being involves faith and that belief in a diabolic one does not, a difference that is marked in French by *en* (for trust and hope, i.e. faith) and *à* (for plain cognitive belief). This gives rise to certain collocations in the norm. Another kind of limitation pertains to constructions. Coseriu (1970a, 42) illustrates this with nominalised adjectives signifying nations in German, which by default are interpreted as designating the corresponding language: *das Englische* (the English) has as its normal sense 'the English language'. Other nominalised adjectives, such as *das Wahre* (the true) and *das Schöne* (the beautiful), receive more general interpretations: 'that which is true', 'that which is beautiful', etc.

Monosemy and polysemy

In his semantic work, Coseriu strongly favours a monosemist approach to meaning, a view that he derives from the structuralist notion of the solidarity between signifier and signified. The constitutive properties of a linguistic system are those that are delineated on both planes of the linguistic sign, or in other words, that are functionally distinctive. From this structure follows an assumption of monosemy: each sign is assumed to have one invariant, *unitary meaning* that is present throughout all possible uses. Only if the assumption proves to be obviously false is it abandoned (Coseriu 1992, chap. 7). This stance in favour of monosemy is strictly speaking not required for the arguments pursued in the present article. All that is required is that system and norm are kept apart, and that the former is more general than the latter. To keep things simple, however, I will adhere to the monosemist view.

The possible uses of a unitary meaning are, first of all, merely possible and therefore not necessarily normal, and since their character is one of possibility, and not of normality, they are also infinite in number. Unitary meanings belong to the system, not to the norm, a fact that when overlooked leads to confusion. Critics of structural semantics, Coseriu remarks, have proven to be unaware of the distinction between system and norm, "and therefore their analysis is restricted to the level of normal language use" (2000, 29). On such a norm-centred view of language, to know the meaning of a word is not to apply a unitary meaning: it is to conform with tradition and normality. It is, as expressed by a proponent of the view, to be "able to use the word appropriately, in conformity with the norms of the language, in ways that are accepted by other speakers of the language" (Taylor 2017, 260). Unitary meanings, in contrast, are far removed from normal standards of appropriateness.

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[1] *Strongness* occurs fewer than 0.01 times per million words. *Arrogantness* is even rarer (OED).

Previous research has brought attention to the inclination of polysemist approaches to assume unnecessarily restricted meanings, which on closer scrutiny turn out to be overdetermined (e.g. Coene & Willems 2006, Van der Gucht et al. 2007, De Cuypere 2013, Willems 2013). Attention has also been brought to the importance of distinguishing system from norm, especially so in Willems (2013). These contributions have mainly argued that presumed *polysemy* is in fact *sense variation* and that combinations that have been deemed ill-formed are in fact perfectly fine given an appropriate context. One example is Pustejovsky's (2001, 98) *good rock*, which he claims to be anomalous on the grounds that a rock has no inherent purpose (and thereby nothing it is naturally good for), but this seems like an unhappy conclusion, since the collocation is not too rare in actual language use (Willems 2013, 279). A more precarious task is it to invoke the distinction in cases of possible uses that are disfavoured or patently deviant. We must then assert the possibility of uses that are rejected by speakers of the language.

There is no doubt that the distinction applies also in such cases, but this is curiously not a point that Coseriu appears to have been eager to stress. It should be worthwhile, however, since a common charge against the monosemist stance is that it leads to the adoption of overly general meanings (Lakoff 1987, Langacker 1988, Allwood 2003, Tuggy 2003, Tyler & Evans 2003, Taylor 1999, 2006). From this perspective, unitary meanings that include deviant uses are blatant overgeneralisations that fail the requirement of making accurate predictions. This reasoning follows from the assumption that the description of meaning should be an account of normal language use. Or as it is expressed in Goddard (2011, 37): "we are entitled to expect that an accurate definition … will predict the appropriate range of use of a word". Because of this assumption, proponents of polysemy come to expect that also monosemist accounts of meaning should delimit normal language use. Sometimes they even expect it to be supplemented with a theory of use that accounts for individual senses, so that it through generalisations should be able to both delimit and detail normal language use, which then puts the monosemist approach at a disadvantage in regard to its possible success (as has been pointed out by Riemer 2005, 124ff).

In order to treat this matter in as pure form as possible, we shall have to limit the object matter to roots. Thereby do we exclude the effects of word-formation, an area where the productive capacity of language is not in dispute. More importantly, we also exclude the semantic corollaries of word-formation and do therefore not engage in arguments to the effect that a word like *Hauptmann* has a unitary meaning that is much broader than its normal sense. This might be more contentious, but it shall not concern us here. We will concentrate on the argument that also roots have unitary meanings that include more uses than are part of the norm. What's more, we limit the argument to uses that are not merely unfamiliar but also deviant, i.e. uses that are undoubtedly proscribed by the norm. These restrictions, which condense the matter to its core, should make the argument sufficiently radical to demonstrate the unique and far-reaching consequences of using the concepts of system and norm in semantics.

Prepositions of concomitance

As examples of roots we will use simple prepositions. A suitable starting point is German *mit*, a recurring example in Coseriu's work. The preposition has a wide range of uses, including instrument (*mit dem Messer* 'with the knife'), comitative (*mit einem Freund* 'with a friend'), sentiment (*mit Freude* 'with joy'), and material (*mit Mehl* 'with flour'). Coseriu proposes that the unitary meaning is 'und x ist dabei' ('and x is there') or, in a word, *concomitance* (e.g. Coseriu 1970b, 1987; Coseriu also uses the term *copresence*). Interestingly, Coseriu (1989) has proposed the same unitary meaning for French *avec*, a preposition with a comparable range of uses. Similar meanings have

also been suggested by other linguists for corresponding prepositions, although mostly in passing and not as the main point of analysis. Ralph (1984, 12) describes the general meaning of Swedish *med* as "association (simultaneous occurrence)"[2], and Haug (2009, 339) the meaning of Norwegian *med* as "'concomitance' in a wide sense". Rapoport (2014, 160) proposes that partial dictionary definitions of English *with* can be "condensed into a single definition of accompaniment or simultaneousness". These are all very similar, if not identical, notions of the prepositional meaning. For the sake of argument, I will assume it is exactly 'concomitance' in all cases, barring for the moment the possibility of interlingual differences.

Given the polysemist requirement that meanings provide an account of normal language use, one would now expect these prepositions to be used in an identical manner. The expectation is of course not borne out. While there indeed are considerable overlaps, there are also noticeable differences.

Table 1 shows a partial comparison (not including all common uses) of English *with*, German *mit*, Swedish *med* and French *avec*. (Norwegian *med* has not been included.) The first four uses are taken from Coseriu's (1970b) discussion of *mit*. The other uses have been selected to demonstrate differences between the languages. The first two uses, instrumental and comitative, exemplify the preference in European languages to express both senses by the same morpheme (Stolz et al. 2006, 2013). Identical uses of the four prepositions are also seen for 'sentiment' and 'material'. The remaining eight uses illustrate differences in various constellations. German and Swedish agree for 'means of transportation', 'object of cessation', and 'content of container', whereas English and French have other prepositions or none at all. English and French agree for 'part of meal', whereas German and Swedish have *zu* and *till*. German, Swedish and French agree for 'theme of marriage', whereas English has *to*. Only English uses its preposition of concomitance for 'manner or cause of action' and 'object of emotion', and only Swedish uses its corresponding preposition for 'pertaining to'. These discrepancies show that the unitary meaning of concomitance is an overgeneralisation from the point of view of normal language use. The question is how to respond to it.

Table 1. Uses of prepositions of concomitance in English, German, Swedish, and French. Exclamation mark indicates deviation from at least the norm. Norm-correct expressions for the intended designations are given within parentheses.

Use	English *with*	German *mit*	Swedish *med*	French *avec*
instrument	cut with the knife	mit dem Messer schneiden	skära med kniven	couper avec le couteau
comitative	go with a friend	mit einem Freund gehen	gå med en vän	aller avec un ami
sentiment	do it with joy	mit Freude machen	göra det med nöje	le faire avec plaisir
material	sprinkle with flour	mit Mehl bestreuen	strö med mjöl	saupoudrer avec la farine (more common: saupoudrer de farine)
means of transportation	!go with train (go by train)	mit dem Zug fahren	åka med tåg	!aller avec train (aller en train)

part of meal	serve biscuits with the coffee	!Kekse mit dem Kaffee servieren (Kekse zum Kaffee servieren)	!servera kakor med kaffet (servera kakor till kaffet)	servir des biscuits avec le café
object of emotion	be angry with you	!wütend mit dir sein (wütend auf dich sein)	!vara arg med dig (vara arg på dig)	!être en colère avec toi (être en colère apres toi)
object of marriage	!be married with him (be married to him)	mit ihm verheiratet sein	vara gift med honom	être marié avec lui
object of cessation	!quit with tobacco (quit tobacco)	mit dem Tabak aufhören	sluta med tobak	!arrêter avec le tabac (arrêter le tabac)
manner or cause of action	scream with pain	!mit Schmerz schreien (vor Schmerz schreien)	!skrika med smärta (skrika av smärta)	!hurler avec douleur (hurler de douleur)
pertaining to	!like everything with Berlin (like everything about Berlin)	!alles mit Berlin mögen (alles an Berlin mögen)	gilla allt med Berlin	!aimer tout avec Berlin (aimer tout de Berlin)
content of container	!a glass with beer (a glass of beer)	ein Glas mit Bier (more common: ein Glas Bier)	ett glas med öl (more common: ett glas öl)	!un verre avec bière (un verre de bière)

Broadly speaking, there are three possible responses. The first response is to maintain the assumed meaning and to invoke the distinction between system and norm: the differences are due to different norms; unitary meanings belong to the system. The second response is to take the impression of overgeneralisation at face value and to insist on the particularity of each language: it was a mistake to assume the same unitary meaning for all languages; the meaning must be adjusted to each one of them. The third response is to take the apparent overgeneralisation as evidence against the monosemist approach itself: 'concomitance' is not merely an erroneous description in this particular case; it is a mistake in principle to assume a unitary meaning like this. Of these responses, the first and second are committed to monosemy, whereas the third is not. The second and third response have another notion in common, however, namely that no deviant uses should be subsumed under the description. Whereas the second response, in contrast to the third, does not subscribe to the idea that a semantic description must detail normal language use, it does assume that it must delimit normal language use. To the best of my knowledge, there are no linguists who actually endorse this position, but it represents what critics of monosemy tend to expect from a monosemist account. For this reason, it is worth considering in relation to the position of the first response.

It is of course possible that the unitary meanings of *with, mit, med*, and *avec*, contrary to our assumption, are slightly different and that this is reflected in different usage patterns. There are also grammatical differences between the languages that influence prepositional usage. But it is unlikely

that such semantic and grammatical differences could account for all of the observed differences. Hence, we have reason to believe that some deviant uses are permitted by the system. A closer look at a few examples will reinforce this point. For the sake of brevity, we will concentrate on English *with*.

In our example, German and Swedish use *mit* and *med* for 'object of cessation', while English and French have expressions with a direct object. English has *quit tobacco*, not *quit with tobacco*. Of importance, however, is that English does not in general disallow *with* in objects of cessation. Expressions like *quit with the lies* or *stop with the false advertising* are perfectly fine. The similar *quit with the job*, however, is not. To all appearances, these are constructional restrictions that relate to the semantics of the complement of *with*. Whatever the precise conditions for the use of *with* in objects of cessation might be, they must be rather specific, more so than could be accounted for by a unitary meaning. In other words, a meaning like 'concomitance', which is meant to cover all possible uses of *with*, cannot reasonably be expected to discriminate between expressions like *quit with tobacco* and *quit with the lies*. Not even polysemic descriptions would normally be able to make such minute distinctions.

In contrast to German, Swedish, and French, English does not use *with* but *to* in objects of marriage: *be married to him*, not *be married with him*. The same use of *to* is seen in a few other expressions for nuptial relationships, such as *be engaged to him* and *be betrothed to him*, and in some expressions for other familial relationships, such as *be related to him*. In expressions for personal relationships, *to* is used in some cases, such as *be a good friend to him*, *be like a sister to me*, and *with* in other cases, such as *be friends with him*, *be associated with him*. Also the marital *become joined with him in marriage* and the general *be involved with him* have *with*. Others constructions permit both prepositions with little to no difference in the resulting designation: *be allied with him* or *be allied to him*, *be connected with him* or *be connected to him*. More generally, considering a broader spectrum of uses, English has several expressions where *to* and *with* alternate in the same fashion: *compared with/to, conform with/to, connection with/to, similarity with/to, talk with/to*. In some such cases, the choice between *with* and *to* is at most vaguely distinctive, which stands in stark contrast to other pairs, such as *go to him* and *go with him*, which are clearly distinct. Sometimes the sentences are entirely equivalent: *he was connected with the mafia* or *he was connected to the mafia*.

As we can see, there are circumstances where the opposition between the two prepositions does not yield a substantial difference at the level of designation. This sporadic affinity between *with* and *to* is an *irregular equivalence*, i.e. an occasional identity of designation that does not in general hold for the items in question. Such equivalences cannot readily be accounted for in terms of polysemy, or so I have attempted to show in previous work. They require an analysis based on unitary meanings (author). To make sense of this particular case of irregular equivalence, we must briefly consider *to*. In a study of *to, towards, until, into, in* and *at*, De Cuypere (2013) proposes that the meaning of *to* is 'establisher of a relationship between X and reference point Y', which is a feature of the meaning of the other prepositions as well, but in *to* it is the only necessary feature. In other words, *to* has a very general meaning, even as prepositions go. Assuming this meaning for *to* and 'concomitance' for *with*, the cause of such equivalences must be that certain state of affairs are insensitive to the distinction between the mere establishment of a relationship and the concomitance of the relationship. If we transpose this observation to an object of marriage, there appears to be no systemic reason to choose *to* over *with*. One could think of the two-place predicate of being married in terms of the establishment or in terms of the concomitance; it does not yield a substantial difference. Adding these things together – that irregular equivalences require unitary meanings and that there appears to be no systemic reason for the norm – we deduce the need for an analysis in terms of unitary meanings that include deviant uses. The strong preference for *to* over *with* in

expressions for nuptial relationships, such as *married to him* and *engaged to him*, is merely a rule of the norm.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that *with* occurs in common expressions where the PP does not designate an object of marriage, but instead other family members or an object of action, as in *married with two kids* or *engaged with the task*. It is possible that the preference for *to* in the nuptial category is reinforced by such expressions. The collocation *married with him* would then be similar to *arrogantness* not only in that both are deviant, but also partially in the cause of the deviance, namely the existence of a competing expression. To accurately assess this suggestion a more extensive investigation of *with* is required.

Methodological concerns

The analysis in the previous section suggests that some deviant uses of *with* are in accordance with the system. Opponents to the structural disposition inherent in this analysis might see a methodological danger in the tolerance for deviant uses. It could, they might worry, lead to an overly lenient attitude that leaves language description without a sound foundation in evidence. The linguist might, as it were, mould the evidence to fit the description, because what is to decide which usage is and which is not permitted by the system? I propose to continue with a few clarifications to calm the worst concerns.

The assertion that a deviant use is permitted by the system is relative to a description. It is not an immediate judgement over the well-formedness of an expression. It is explication, not intuition (cf. Itkonen 2003). In the case of *married with him*, the assertion crucially rests on the assumption that the unitary meaning of *with* is 'concomitance'. In addition, it has been guided by an assumption that is helpful but dispensable: the heuristic of using comparisons with other languages to gauge the limits of English *with*. If the crucial assumption is in doubt, there are the standard ways to substantiate it: investigation of the usage of *with*, and investigation of the paradigmatic neighbours of *with*. The former checks if all extant uses are compatible with the assumed meaning (thereby assessing its invariance), the latter if the semantic integrity of each term in the paradigm is upheld (thereby assessing their distinctiveness). The present context has not permitted an extensive investigation of this sort.

The assertion itself is also open to scrutiny on the basis of what it entails: a deviant use that is permitted by the system must be interpretable in a manner compatible with the proposed unitary meaning. In our example the requirement is satisfied: *married with him* is comprehensible and receives an interpretation that is equivalent to *married to him*, an affinity that is not found in expressions such as *married of him, married in him, married at him, married about him, married over him,* or *married through him*, which are either incongruent or understood differently. If in doubt, this claim is open to experimental testing, for instance by sense similarity and sensicality judgement tasks.

Conclusion

The import of the structural stance expounded in this article is that the system permits deviant uses of roots. This follows from a consistent application of the distinction between system and norm. To say that *married with him* is permitted by the system is analogous to saying that *arrogantness* is. The basic notion underlying this line of thought is that a language is organised as a system of oppositions. The semantic potential of a root is therefore not exhausted by its normal use. There are infinite possibilities within the space circumscribed by the system. Semantic descriptions of the

system can accordingly not be expected to delimit normal language use or account for the all of its variants. Serious attention to the system sets a rather different goal for semantic descriptions. It is not the same thing as describing normal language use. This difference, however, is not always appreciated in other strands of linguistics. In this article, I have therefore sought to clarify some part of what a semantic description of the system is actually supposed to be.

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