On the Meaning of English Adverb *as good as* : A Cognitive View

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0. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics is an approach to language that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it. In this paper we will explore from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics where the meaning of the adverb *as good as*, which can be interpreted as 'almost; nearly,' comes from.

1. The Problem

Okimoto (1996) introduces a meaning analysis of the group conjunctions *as far as* and *as long as*, which have often puzzled English learners. In it he points out that the distinction between the usage of *as far as* and that of *as long as* can be made by examining the meanings of the heads *far* and *long*. However, attempting to guess the meaning of *as good as* by only considering the head *good* is difficult. We will claim in this paper that the network model Langacker has developed shows a key to the problem.

2. A Proposal

As we have stated earlier, the group of words has the meaning of 'almost; nearly; practically' as in (1).

(1) a. He is *as good as* dead.
  b. The work is *as good as* finished.

But what is the relation between this meaning and the fundamental interpretation of *good* as 'high quality; high standard'? Furthermore,

consideration of the following examples complicate the problem, for the common meaning of *good* in (2a-c) is 'certainty or reliability.'

(2) a. He is *as good as* his word.
  b. She claimed that he *as good as* promised to marry.
  c. An Englishman's word is *as good as* his bond.

However, if we look to the world of commerce, an interesting fact will emerge:

(3) a. a *good* firm
  b. a *good* debt
  c. *good* securities

Words like 'safe' or 'credit' are key words that refer to the type of reputation that superior companies must maintain in order to survive. The meaning of *good* extracted from the examples in (3a-c) is 'commercially safe and certain.' 'Certainty or reliability,' the meaning in (2), is a prerequisite of this meaning in (3). It is this 'certainty or reliability' that expands to 'commercially safe and certain' in the business world. The meaning 'almost; nearly; practically' in (1) is actually a result of combining the meaning 'certainty or reliability' and the comparison equality structure *as ... as*. In other words, the meaning of the compound derived from *good* is 'the right kind' as in the expressions *I have good reasons for saying so'* and *I have firm grounds for my judgment.'*

3. The Network Model

Figure 1 below depicts a fragment of the network associated with the adjective *good*.
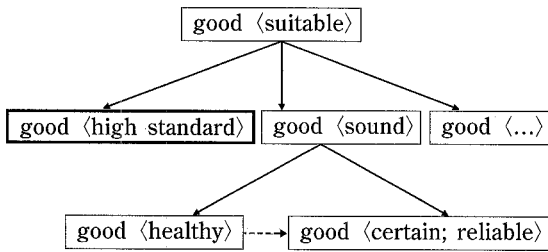

Figure 1

Semantic units are indicated by boxes and the boldface represents the category prototype. Schematicity is indicated by a solid arrow, while extension is indicated by a broken-line arrow. This kind of network is called a schematic network in cognitive linguistics and a lexical network in English pedagogy.[1]

In this paper we regard the core of *good* as 'being suitable' shown at the top of the diagram.[2] Its prototype is the unit [good⟨high standard⟩], which we have earlier called the fundamental interpretation of the adjective *good*. The semantic unit [good ⟨sound⟩] derived schematically from the top instantiates the unit [good ⟨healthy⟩] at the bottom in (4):

(4) a. Morning walks are *good* for your health.
　　b. This medicine is *good* for a fever.

As an extension from human beings to things, the unit [good ⟨certain; reliable⟩] is derived next to it. Thus, connected with the function of comparison equality *as ... as*, this semantic unit meaning 'certainty or reliability' changes into the unit meaning 'the right kind' as a derivation.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have made a meaning analysis of the word group *as good as*, which is an interesting case where attempting to guess the meaning of it by only considering the head is difficult. Then we have proposed an alternative explanation to seek the meaning by using the network model Langacker has developed. We can see from this observation on the meaning of *as good as* that the network model shows the potential of a cognitive approach to English language learning.

Notes

1. See Langacker (1986, 1987), Yamanashi (2000), and Horie (1998) for details.
2. See Masamura (2002).

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