

Anna Vogel (2004) *Swedish Dimensional Adjectives*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International. (Illustrated by Agnes Stenqvist.) Pp. iv, 378.

Reviewed by Heli Tissari

This book deserves attention for several reasons, the main one being that it is a systematic and thorough account of Swedish dimensional adjectives, including *hög, låg, bred, vid, tjock, smal, tunn, trång, djup, grund, lång,* and *kort*, but there are several subsidiary reasons. This is a book for people interested in cognitive linguistics, prototypes, embodiment, and spatial conceptualization, as well as for people interested in combining corpus methodology with dictionaries and elicitation tests. Vogel herself also points to the relevance of her work for the study of antonymy (pp. 11, 359 et passim). What makes the book even more attractive to read is that it contains 35 apt illustrations of the issues discussed.

Towards the end of her book, Vogel says that she has “wanted to pay ... attention to interesting cases that were relatively infrequent” (p. 356). In my view, this statement characterizes her dissertation very well. It is full of small details which make it sometimes slow to assimilate, indeed puzzling or as if requiring a counterargument, but also charming like a well-renovated and lovingly decorated Swedish country house with many cupboards, small windows, niches and secret little doors. One must also be aware that the house overlooks a broad landscape, since the topic is pertinent to general theorizing within cognitive linguistics.

The index (pp. 374–377) reveals a number of thematic threads which hold the book together. These comprise containment, direction, front (for functional reasons, as regards dealing with everyday objects), horizontality, orientation, path, perspective, surface, verticality, and vision. What also comes through in the text itself is grabbing, holding, moving, mending, and using objects and tools, as well as moving in changeable environments and regarding these and their consistent parts (such as houses, trees, streets or rivers) from various points of view. The focus is on non-metaphorical uses of the words studied (pp. 36–37).

Vogel’s data come from Språkbanken (the Bank of Swedish corpus), an elicitation test, and five major Swedish dictionaries (pp. 33–44). She also emphasizes her native speaker intuition (p. 44), while admitting that not all native speakers agree on all issues (see, e.g., p. 327). Sometimes they do not even have an opinion (p. 306). It would hardly be reasonable for a single person to analyse more corpus data for one thesis, considering that the two Språkbanken sections she has used for her searches total more

than 9 million words (p. 33). It puzzled me a little that she suggested a “great amount of spatial, non-metaphorical uses in fiction” (p. 355). I would have liked to see this explained and evidenced in more detail as against other genres or text types. It is difficult not to be somewhat critical of the elicitation test, since Vogel herself admits that she would have liked to develop her first version of the test but did not have the time (p. 356). However, if there is a shortcoming in this respect, it is at least partially overcome by her own introspection and observations on spoken language and everyday life (p. 33, cf., e.g., pp. 182, 184, 188, 191). At this point it might be mentioned that humour enlivens the discussion of these and other issues throughout the book.

The book presents us with everyday experiences ranging from eggs and soup to fields of wheat and ground frost (pp. 161, 205, 226, 277, 323, 325). It deals with pokers and ceiling boards as well as towels and jewellery (pp. 142–143, 147–148, 174–175, 223, 318–319). Of the natural elements, water and snow are favourite topics. Her summary on waves is (p. 350):

...*vågor* ‘waves’ can be described as *höga* ‘high’, but hardly as *låga* ‘low’, as *djupa* ‘deep’ but hardly as *grunda* ‘shallow’, as *långa* ‘long’, as *korta* ‘short’, as *tunna* ‘thin’ but not as *tjocka* ‘thick’.

Discussions of furniture and buildings continue throughout the book. Among other things, Vogel considers the orientation of the human body with respect to washing machines (pp. 135–138). It is difficult to imagine how to come closer to the motto formulated by Rohrer (2001: 78): “Cognitive linguistics can and should be vitally engaged with pragmatic problems.”

The discussion of each Swedish adjective is preceded by an overview of research on related adjectives in other languages, including English, French, German, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Yucatec Maya, and some other, more sporadic examples such as Latin and Finnish. A difficulty concerning the discussion is that it combines studies based on several different theoretical assumptions.

The title of Vogel’s book connects it with Bierwisch and Lang’s *Dimensional Adjectives* (1989), but they actually represent a rather different school of thought, intending what might be called a “highly specific system of logical relations” (Bierwisch 1989: 2), which they capture in tree diagrams and complex formulae (see, e.g., Bierwisch 1967: 19–21, 32–33, Lang 1989: 288–289, 373–375). The degree of mathematical

precision in their work is higher than that achieved by Vogel. While we must keep in mind that such precision was not her aim, simply considering her theoretical premises, she could perhaps still have attempted to summarize some of her results in a manner akin to theirs. A simple example is Bierwisch's scheme for "different dimensions of certain objects" (1967: 14–15), in which he lists the German words used for the three dimensions of cars, doors, and streets.

As regards theoretical premises, Vogel herself is avowedly open-minded, coming to the conclusion that studies representing various traditions yield useful and often similar results. She is also of the opinion that the Swedish dimensional adjectives behave much like their German and English counterparts (p. 353). She herself considers her adjectives as forming prototypical categories, favouring Langacker's (1987: 369–408) network model e.g. on the assumption that "there are relations not only between the central member and the remaining members, but also between separate non-central members" of the network (p. 357). She arrives at final descriptions of adjectives in the following style (p. 242):

The prototypical use of *trång* 'narrow' combines the adjective with a noun referring to a path, passage or container for a human being. Less prototypical uses involve objects that are surfaces perceived as containers and passages, for which *trång* 'narrow' invokes only one dimension, as is the case with *trång dörr* 'narrow door' as opposed to *trång öppning* 'narrow opening'. When only one dimension is invoked, *trång* 'narrow' and *smal* 'narrow/thin' overlap.

Trång is considered a simple category, since it has only one prototypical use, whereas the related adjectives *smal* 'narrow/thin' and *tunn* 'thin' are regarded as complex categories with more than one centre (p. 241).

Developing the concept of semantic networks does not appear to be very high on Vogel's agenda (cf. Evans 2005). Rather, she concerns herself with showing that dimensional adjectives do not belong to antonyms *par excellence* (as implied by Ljung 1974, although less directly, as Vogel, p. 359, seems to claim) and "do not form a neat patchwork" (p. 359). While the mere length of her discussion suggests that a "neat patchwork" account is not the whole story, she might have summarized her findings numerically as well in order to prove the point. She does include simple statistics all along, but finishes with almost apologising for not using "statistical analysis" (p. 356). This kind of hedging characterizes a number of passages of her thesis, but is often quite unnecessary and could either be entirely left out or supplemented by a bolder formulation.

Vogel's denial of the "neat patchwork" account also agrees with previous studies and is thus by no means revolutionary. Consider Bierwisch's (1967: 31) statement that "not all the (+Pol) space adjectives have simple and unique antonymous counterparts" or the title of Lang's (1989: 334–335) section "Designation gaps".

With respect to embodiment, Vogel favours Sinha's ideas, being especially fond of the criticism he directs at the idea of the human body as a prototypical container (Sinha & Jensen de López 2000: 22). Vogel points out, for example, that the concept of fatness/bigness is not understood simply through having experienced one's own body as heavy (and containing plenty of substance), but also through not being able to do things, such as buttoning up one's jeans, through "feeling that [one's] clothes are too tight", or, even more importantly, associating other people's bodies with fatness/bigness (pp. 198–199). By the way, in this passage as well as at some other points, it seemed to me that Vogel could probably have expressed herself even better in Swedish. It is a pity that the formulation of some of her ideas may suffer because she has directed her thesis to a larger audience than the Swedish-speaking, in itself is a very reasonable goal.

Vogel repeatedly refers to Clark (1973), which is a good reference because it shows that many of the ideas proposed by cognitive linguistics from the 1980s onwards have been clearly expressed and discussed in research papers even earlier. Clark's article (1973) is a somewhat superficial but concise and to-the-point summary of many issues concerning embodiment. These include a person's "cognitive framework" ("man's [sic] biological endowment"), the "three natural reference planes" (the left-right axis, the front-back axis, and the ground level), and the "canonical encounter", which occurs face-to-face, rather than "side to side, or back to back" (Clark 1973: 28, 34–35).

Vogel's thesis demonstrates that she can analyse complex data productively. She clearly delights in pondering various spatial combinations and the linguistic expressions used to convey them, and is also quite interested in the theoretical aspects of these issues. She is nevertheless somewhat shy about making theoretical claims and developing them towards innovative generalizations. However, I suggest that other people might find her thesis a fascinating read even because of this – the book may be a source of inspiration for thinking about the nature of cognition and embodiment and for developing cognitive linguistics towards a better understanding and formulation of many issues concerning space. A

topic that is quite relevant here is spatial metaphors, which she does not discuss, but which have intrigued many other researchers. From a theoretical point of view, it would be very interesting to read a similarly detailed treatment of the behaviour of spatial metaphors and to see how they relate to their non-metaphorical counterparts.

In my last quote from her book, Vogel comments on the process of collecting references for her thesis (p. 354): “Hopefully this has taught me to keep an open mind on ideas from unconventional sources.” I would like to finish by suggesting that if she wishes to develop her research along similar spatial lines, she might also consider whether and how the human body is partitioned (in relationship to other objects described) in terms of dimensional adjectives (cf. Dudis 2004), and how designers fit artefacts to people, more or less successfully (Norman 1993, 1998/2000). In the homeland of Ikea, such a project could have not only pragmatic but also quite practical consequences.

References

- Bierwisch, Manfred (1967) Some semantic universals of German adjectivals. *Foundations of Language* 3: 1–36.
- Bierwisch, M. & Lang, E. (1989) *Dimensional Adjectives: Grammatical Structure and Conceptual Interpretation*. Berlin, New York, London etc.: Springer-Verlag.
- Clark, Herbert H. (1973) Space, time, semantics, and the child. In Timothy E. Moore (ed.) *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language* pp. 27–63. New York, London etc.: Academic Press.
- Dudis, Paul G. (2004) Body-partitioning and real-space blends. *Cognitive Linguistics* 15–2: 223–238.
- Evans, Vyvyan (2005) The meaning of *time*: polysemy, the lexicon and conceptual structure. *Journal of Linguistics* 41: 33–75.
- Lang, Ewald (1989) The semantics of dimensional designation of spatial objects. In Manfred Bierwisch and Ewald Lang (eds.), pp. 263–417.
- Langacker, Ronald (1987) *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*. Volume I: Theoretical Prerequisites. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ljung, Magnus (1974) Some remarks on antonymy. *Language* 50–1: 74–88.
- Norman, Donald A. (1993) *Things That Make Us Smart*. Reading (Mass.): Addison Wesley.
- (1998/2000) *The Design of Everyday Things*. London: The MIT Press.
- Rohrer, Tim (2001) Pragmatism, ideology and embodiment: William James and the philosophical foundations of cognitive linguistics. In René Dirven, Bruce Hawkins & Esra Sandikcioglu (eds.), *Language and Ideology. Volume I: Theoretical Cognitive Approaches*, pp. 49–81. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Sinha, Chris & Kristine Jensen de López (2000) Language, culture and the embodiment of spatial cognition. *Cognitive Linguistics* 11-1/2: 17-41.

Contact information:

Heli Tissari
Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies
P.O.Box 4 (Fabianinkatu 24)
FIN-00014 University of Helsinki
Finland
e-mail: heli.tissari@helsinki.fi