

Pæn, Flot, Dejlig, and Lækker A Lexical Anthropology of Danish Folk Aesthetics

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1. Introduction

- “Lexical Anthropology”, a synthesis of lexical semantics and linguistic anthropology, cf. Wierzbicka’s *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words* (1997), and Levisen & Waters’ “How Words do Things with People” (2017).
- “Ethnoaesthetics” – aesthetics is culturally constituted and diverse; everyday aesthetic language is full of untranslatables; these untranslatables are central to our quest for understanding ethnoaesthetic diversity, and the link between language, vision and culture-specific cognition (cp. Gladkova & Romero-Trillo 2014).

2. A handful of Danish Untranslatables

- *pæn* ‘good-looking, neat, pretty’,
- *flot*, ‘good-looking, attractive, impressive’
- *dejlig*, ‘lovely, delightful, beautiful’
- *lækker* ‘delicious, pretty, hot’.

On Danish semantics, see also Levisen (2012, 2014, 2018)

3. Semantic Analysis

- Two basic frames: (i) “Something *pæn/flot/dejlig/lækker*” and (ii) “someone *pæn/flot/dejligt/lækker*.” There are also action-frames, speech-frames, place-frames, body-part-frames, and various other types, and sub-types.
- Extensive polysemy and phraseology: layers of complexity
- The analytical consequence: focus on lexical units, rather than whole lexemes.
- Focus in this talk: “The Something X” frame (i) for these four Danish words
- The NSM method of explication -> high-resolution analysis

3.1 The meaning of *pæn* and *flot*

- Something *pæn*, prototypically: interior design items, clothes, etc.
- *Pæn* is an antonym of *grim* ‘ugly’, and the *pæn-grim* axis produces a realm of “aesthetic normality”
- Something *flot*, prototypically: art, scenic views, etc.
- *Flot* is not antonymic as a default; it produces a realm of the aesthetically conspicuous and unusual.

[A] Explication for *en pæn vase* ‘a *pæn* vase’

- a. when someone looks at this vase, this someone can think like this:
“I can say good things about it, I can’t say bad things about it”
- b. because of this, this someone can feel something good when this someone looks at it
at the same time, this someone doesn’t feel something bad when this someone looks at it
- c. it is good when a thing is like this, some things are not like this

[B] Explication for *flot maleri* ‘flot painting’

- a. when someone looks at this painting, this someone can think like this:
“I can say many good things about it”
- b. because of this, when this someone looks at it, this someone can feel something good
- c. when a thing is like this, people can’t not look at it for some time

Excursus: The Person Frame (Frame ii)

Common alliterative phrases

Pæn pige 'pæn girl'

– mock phrase, a boring and ordinary girl, adds to [A] an aspect of social morality, and/or mock-morality

Flot fyr 'flot guy'

– descriptive phrase, an attractive looking guy, the semantics is rather similar to [B]

3.2 The meaning of *dejlig* and *lækker*

- *Dejlig*, discursively prominent in songs: *Dejlig er den Himmel Blå*, *Dejlig er Jorden*, etc.
- 'Something *dejlig*'; prototypically food, good weather, sensually pleasing things
- *Lækker* is an areal term found also in Dutch *lekker*, German *lecker*, Swedish *läcker*
- 'Something *lækker*': prototypically food, sensually pleasing things (of good quality)

[C] Explication for *dejlig kage* 'dejlig cake'

a. when someone looks at this cake, this someone can think like this:

"this cake is like I want it to be,
(because of this, I want to eat it now)"

b. when this someone looks at it, this someone can feel something good,

like people can feel something when something good happens to someone's body

c. when something is like this, **people can't not say something good about it now**

[D] Explication for *lækker lænestol* 'lækker armchair'

a. when someone looks at this armchair, this someone can think like this:

"this armchair is very much like I want it to be,
(because of this, I want to sit in it now)"

b. when this someone looks at it, this someone can feel something very good,

like someone can feel something when something very good happens to this someone's body

c. when something is like this, **someone wants to touch this thing now for some time**

4. Language, vision and culture-specific cognition

Three areas to be further explored:

- The person frames, and the (gendered) social morality of Danish ethnoaesthetics
- Danish aesthetic scripts for the preference of the mundane, and the policing of the normal
- The role of the body: body-based semantics in Danish and other languages

5. Concluding remarks

"Looking into the meaning of a single word.... can give one the same feeling of dizziness that can come from thinking about the distance between galaxies or about the impenetrable empty spaces hidden in a single atom." (Wierzbicka 1996:233)

- The complexity of ethnoaesthetic terminology
- Building lexico-semantic typologies: more explications needed across frames and languages
- Evidence: fieldwork and semantic consultants, corpora of texts, discourse studies, psycholinguistic experiments, but meta-studies are the key.
- A slow process of discovery; formation of new hypothesis, no jumping to conclusions

References

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