

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 453 663

FL 026 723

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TITLE Dictionary, Systemicity, Motivation.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 16p.; For Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, 2000, see FL 026 722.
AVAILABLE FROM EWPAL Subscriptions, IALS, 21 Hill Place, Edinburgh EH8 9DP Scotland UK (7.50 Scottish pounds).
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics; n10 p1-14 2000
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Applied Linguistics; *Definitions; *Dictionaries; *English (Second Language); Grammar; *Lexicography; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

Recent lexicographical work, especially in dictionaries aimed at the Teaching English-as-a-foreign-language (TEFL) market, has tended towards a functional grouping of vocabulary items in thesaurus format, rather than the traditional alphabetical approach of dictionaries. One reason for this, stemming from a more communicative approach to language teaching, is the idea that words are best understood and distinguished when presented as part of a meaning system in isolation. This approach fails, however, to capture the unity of meaning inherent in individual lexemes that is, or can be, demonstrated within the original lexeme-based approach. It is argued that both a lexeme's place within a meaning system and the connections between different senses of each individual lexeme constitute integral parts of its meaning and are essential for a full understanding of the item. It concludes that dictionaries should attempt to capture both sets of relationships within their format and examines ways in which this might be possible, presenting sample entries for modal auxiliaries "can," "could," and "should." (Contains 10 references.) (Author/KFT)

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DICTIONARY, SYSTEMICITY, MOTIVATION

Tom Bartlett (TAAL)

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DICTIONARY, SYSTEMICITY, MOTIVATION

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Abstract

Recent lexicographical work, especially in dictionaries aimed at the TEFL market, has tended towards a functional grouping of vocabulary items in thesaurus format, rather than the traditional alphabetical approach of dictionaries. One reason for this, stemming from a more communicative approach to language teaching, is the idea that words are best understood and distinguished when presented as part of a meaning system rather than in isolation. However, this approach fails to capture the unity of meaning inherent in individual lexemes that is, or can be, demonstrated within the traditional lexeme-based approach.

This paper argues that both a lexeme's place within a meaning system and the connections between the different senses of each individual lexeme constitute integral parts of its meaning and are essential for a full understanding of the item in question. It concludes that dictionaries should attempt to capture both sets of relationships within their format and examines ways in which this might be possible, presenting sample entries for the modal auxiliaries CAN, COULD and SHOULD.

1. Introduction

In 1924 Otto Jespersen stated that:

As a natural consequence of the difficulty of a systematic arrangement of all these special facts [concerning interlexical relations] most dictionaries content themselves with an arrangement in alphabetical order which is completely unscientific, but practically convenient...on the whole no thoroughly satisfactory system is conceivable in the dictionary part of the language.

(Jespersen 1924:34)

Recently, however, vocabulary materials aimed at the learners' market have eschewed this "unscientific" alphabetical approach in favour of a format which groups together clusters of words related by topic, pragmatic function or semantic field. Within these last two groupings, which are considered in this paper, the meaning and nuance of each lexical item is enhanced through its status as a purposeful choice between paradigmatically-related items, that is from within a **systems network**. Contrasts and connections between words can be more fully explored and highlighted, giving the learner finer distinctions in meaning to enhance understanding, and the chance of greater accuracy in production.

However, while this format may enable learners to appreciate the distinctions between words, it denies them the possibility of understanding the **motivation** within lexemes (Swanepoel 1992 *passim*, after Lakoff and Johnson 1980), the shared semantico-pragmatic aspects linking one meaning/usage to another. This will not only hinder a full understanding of the lexeme in question, presented as various discrete sense units, but could give rise to unintentional and undesirable ambiguities in production.

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In the following two sections I hope to show that both systemic contrast and motivated definition are not optional extras, but essential elements in defining lexemes. I will look in particular at the modal auxiliaries CAN, COULD and SHOULD, as modality is an area where both systemicity between and motivation within lexemes are particularly strong and where much communicative value is "at risk" (cf. Hasan and Perret 1994:221).

2. Motivation

My contention here is that most polysemous words, and modals in particular, comprise a nebulous "core meaning" which is expanded, modified and restricted to form subdivisions of meaning and which informs any interpretation of the given lexeme in each context of utterance, while the context of utterance, in turn, slants the interpretation in a particular direction. For example, the sentence

1. *You can go now.*

can be interpreted, depending on context, as giving permission, expressing a curt order, or simply stating that an obstacle to leaving has been removed. However, it is also clear that in each interpretation the meaning of "can" has remained constant inasmuch as it states that the addressee is now in a position to leave, that their leaving is possible. This idea of "possibility" would, then, appear to be the core meaning of CAN (though such a hypothesis would have to be backed up by evidence from the corpus). The various interpretations of the utterance are due to either an extension of this core meaning, with meaning becoming more "delicate" (possibility > permission), or to the cultural implications of context (if someone in authority grants permission this can be taken as an order, but not vice-versa). In other words the lexeme CAN has "meaning potential" (to reinterpret Halliday's term, which is discussed below) which can be restricted and shaped, made more delicate, according to the context of utterance. But what is common to these extensions, restrictions and shapings is that in each case the extension or amplification of meaning/usage (which will often have become conventionalised in the everyday language) is neither totally arbitrary nor fully predictable "but motivated to some degree and in various respects" (Swanepoel 1992:296). While this section examines the predictability aspect of motivation, the section dealing with systemicity considers its arbitrary aspect.

As an example of motivated subdivision in the sample entries we can look at the following example from CAN A.2 (q.v.):

2. *How can you be so stupid?*

The motivation behind this meaning/usage can be traced through the entry as

CAN > possibility > naturally possible > inherent qualities > surprise > example of usage: *How can you be so stupid?*

where each increased level of delicacy would be signalled and the motivation explained within the dictionary entry creating a cumulative, general understanding of CAN and facilitating a particular interpretation in this instance of utterance (cf. Master 1994:245).

It is surely, then, the task of a dictionary to signal and explain these forms of motivation within the entry for an individual lexeme for, by doing so, the entry becomes, rather than a disconnected list of seemingly unrelated meanings, a coherent description of the vitality of the lexeme in question related to the cultural mores of the target language group. Such a description should aid the learner in remembering the meanings and usages of a particular lexeme while at the same time giving a broader and deeper understanding of it, and this should both encourage confident production and reduce the chance of unintended ambiguity.

A further advantage of the motivated approach to definition is concerned with "fuzzy semantics", the idea that the edges between one meaning and another are not always well defined and that pockets of Meaning X may appear in what seems to be Meaning Y, stranded like linguistic Ceutas and Melillas. Given the motivated approach, however, it becomes clear that meaning divisions are not always discrete but rather follow a continuum. Therefore, while it might be difficult to assign:

3. *Taxis should cost about £3.50.*

to one particular final sense division of SHOULD (usually based on a division between epistemic and deontic modality), it clearly belongs within a superordinate, less delicate division with a label along the lines of "what is to be expected" (see SHOULD meaning A below) and would be interpretable with reference to such an entry.

The labelling of sense divisions brings into question the use of formal logic within language and the notions of epistemic and deontic modality themselves. I have preferred to use cultural terms such as "appropriate" as I believe these more accurately capture the essence of the modals and are more in tune with communicative approaches to language teaching. For example, the sentence

4. *The train should be here at ten.* (the timetable dictates)

is, in formal terms, deontic; while

5. *The train should be here soon.* (in my estimation)

is epistemic. But what of:

6. *The train should have been here by now.*

Does this "should" imply "according to my previous estimation" or "because the timetable dictated"? The problem seems to be in the interrelation between expectation and compulsion: is something probable (epistemic) because it is socially enforced (deontic) or enforced because it is the norm?

Similarly, the example sentence

7. *Muskie should have won by a huge margin.*

seems to hover somewhere between an epistemic interpretation (i.e. according to my now clearly erroneous calculations) and a deontic one (i.e. Muskie has no one to blame but him/herself, cf. *You should have done your homework before supper.*). On the other hand,

8. *She left at eight. so she should be home by now.*

is clearly epistemic. Yet both examples 7 and 8 seem to fit into my "non-formal" division of "what is to be expected" into "appropriate behaviour" (SHOULD A1) and "natural course of events" (SHOULD A2), and are so grouped together in the latter.

To sum up: lexemes have a central or "core" meaning when there is a semantico-pragmatic component inherent in all their possible sense divisions. (In contrast, the sample entry for SHOULD has no single core meaning as none seemed appropriate or useful, historical derivation notwithstanding. However, meanings A and B are core to their respective subdivisions.) This core meaning must be neither "counterintuitive" nor "so vague as to deny any sense of explanation" (Perkins 1982:246). Divisions by sense are motivated extensions, restrictions and shapings of this core meaning (reflecting neither Bolinger's (1977) claim that a word is essentially a number of words with different meanings, nor "meaning-minimalism", where contextual factors do the bulk of the interpretative work through a pragmatic interpretation of a single sense). These divisions can, therefore, be represented in systems networks such as the following for CAN (fleshed out and exemplified in the sample entry for CAN at the end):

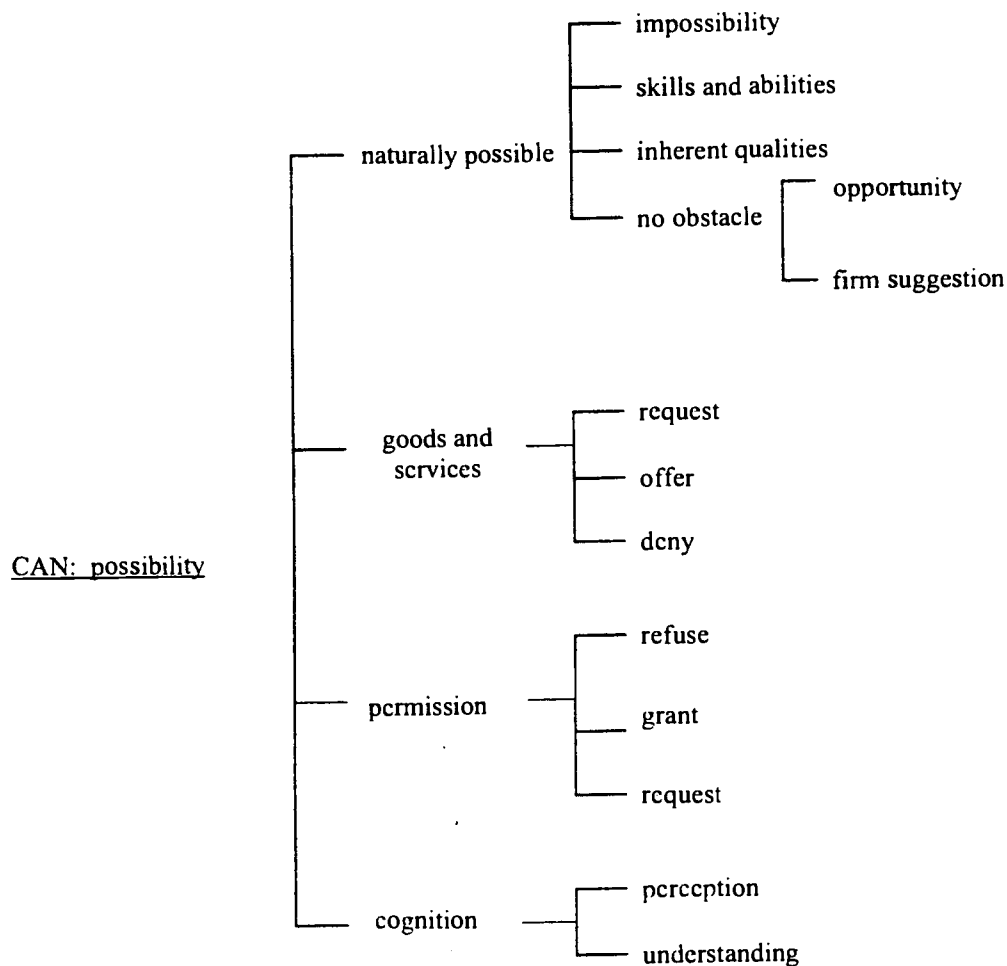


Figure 1. Lexeme-led system network for CAN

Within this network every sense of CAN is motivated by its superordinate meaning, with all meanings/uses eventually deriving from the core meaning of "possibility". This contrasts with the presentation in the leading TEFL dictionaries, which are to a large extent frequency-led, and the new breed of thesaurus, which are topic-based. In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE 1995) the order of entries is very unmotivated with a grouping of similar senses (according to shared semantico-pragmatic components) something like 1,4; 2,3,8; 5,7,9,10; 6, with the implied difference between senses 1 and 4 being far from clear. In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD 1995) the ordering of senses is motivated, but the range of meanings and functions in sense 1a is too broad not to require further motivational information and sense 6 appears superfluous as a result. In COBUILD English Language Dictionary (COBUILD 1995) the ordering is highly motivated to begin with but less common usages (which are possibly those that require most motivation for a good understanding) tend to get divorced from their immediately superordinate meanings. The grouping is something like 1,2,3,6,7 (+8,9,10?); 4,5; 11. The Longman Language Activator (1993), conversely, has the meanings/uses of CAN spread over the communicative categories CAN 1-5, LET/ALLOW 3&5, POSSIBILITY 1&2, and TRY TO DO OR GET SOMETHING DONE.

3. Systemicity

The flipside of internal linkage through motivation is the external comparison of lexemes with others within the same semantic field, that is, within the same systems network. Whereas above we dealt with the meaning potential of a lexeme, we now turn to Halliday's (1973 *passim*) use of meaning potential as the scope for linguistic behaviour within a given situation. Again we are interested in notions of delicacy, in this case in how more complex situations demand increasingly sensitive lexicogrammatical realisation, in both semantic and pragmatic terms. It is this agentive capacity of the speaker, their choice within the system, explicitly opposed to the stimulus-and-response of behaviourism, that makes language truly verbal behaviour:

If by way of demanding a service one always *had* to produce a direct command, then no specific significance could be attached to this form of demanding service, and language would have to be seen simply as a set of mandatory rules which must be followed mechanically. The possibility of choice removes this mechanical determinacy from language, and imbues the alternatives – the terms of the system – with value. The value of any one option is determined by its relation to the other options that were "available" in the system at that point.

(Hasan and Perret 1994:190)

If, then, we accept that a term's "value" is an integral part of its meaning, and I think this is undeniable, and that this value is "determined by its relation to the other options that were "available" in the system at that point", then it follows that this relation to other options is an integral part of meaning and is essential within any definition of the word that hopes to be of genuine communicative value.

To bring in a cultural/geographical analogy: would it be possible to understand the concept of "Poland" without knowing that it borders both Germany and Russia? Similarly, Poland's borders have been very flexible over the last century, expanding here and being restricted there. This is also the case with words as core meanings spread to cover new communicative areas as society creates new ideational concepts and interpersonal relationships. This spread, while clearly motivated, is also in some respects arbitrary, as it is usually the case that more than one modal or modal form, for example, would have been able to adapt to cover the new concept. This is shown by a cross-language comparison where the notion of theoretical possibility is covered by the conditional COULD BE in English, whereas Spanish uses present tense PUEDE SER. In English this tense would correspond only to what I have labelled "inherent qualities" in figure 3, e.g.

9. *It can be cold here in winter.*

Given this level of arbitrariness, it becomes essential to mark the limits of extension of each lexeme, and this can most effectively be done by marking its boundaries with other lexemes and explaining the differences in meaning and nuance between these choices. In so doing, the user is also provided not only with a more accurate and delicate understanding of the lexeme in question, but also with useable alternatives that have been productively contrasted, in much the same way as with the thesaurus approach. This approach also caters for fuzziness between lexemes as opposed to within them. Compare the following sentences:

10. *You should go to the Bahamas for your holidays.*

11. *You could go to the Bahamas for your holidays.*

In most TEFL dictionaries (COBUILD: COULD 8, SHOULD 1; LDOCE: COULD 5, SHOULD ?; OALD: COULD 4, SHOULD 2), both examples would be labelled as making suggestions, yet there is clearly a difference in the type of suggestion being made in each case which none of these dictionaries presents (and to compound matters, LDOCE: COULD 5 defines this usage as "used to suggest what you think

someone *should* or might be able to do", my emphasis). Adopting a contrastive approach, however, we could include in the entry for e.g. COULD:

Sometimes this form is used to suggest that something is a possible choice, **in contrast with SHOULD**, which is used to say that something is the appropriate action: *Perhaps we could discuss this after dinner./You could always drop them a line./You should explain.*

Such a presentation is innovative in the context of an alphabetical dictionary in that it breaks the convention of not citing examples for lexemes other than the headword. This is justified, however, on the grounds that, combined with the explicit comparison given in the definition, the example brings into relief the semantico-pragmatic differences between suggesting with COULD and with SHOULD. As an alternative to this explicit information, the motivational build-up to the "suggestion" sense should in each case indicate the type of suggestion being made, and this is the approach taken with SHOULD (q.v.).

These examples should make one point very clear with regard to a systemic definition of lexemes: if a learner does not know the difference between the meanings of two lexemes then they do not know the full meaning of either. Hence, a lexeme's place in the system is an inherent part of its meaning and cannot be ignored or relegated to external pragmatics boxes, as is the case with LDOCE and OALD, where systemic comparison is presented as supplementary to internal definition and appears only for selected modals and in a limited array of contrasts (with LDOCE again compounding the error, in an otherwise extensive systemic description of CAN, by glossing *I can swim now* with *I am able to swim now*).

To return to the idea of meaning potential: what we have is a network of situations, becoming increasingly delicate, where the most delicate meaning is realised by the choice of lexeme and structure (lexicogrammar). Such a network is almost the inverse of my lexeme-led system: where, in that representation, each realisation represented a different social context for the use of the lexeme CAN, in the following concept-led figure each realisation represents a lexicogrammatical distinction expressing variations within the superordinate conceptual category of "*possibility*" (as realised through the modal auxiliaries CAN, SHOULD and COULD: it is not exhaustive). It should be noted here that the endpoints in the systems network below are generated by (and therefore restricted to) those that are lexicogramatically distinct within the natural language. In other words, the endpoints of the systems network for the concept "*possibility*" below are not derived from an extralinguistic formal logic and then matched with lexicogrammatical realisations; rather, it is the system of lexicogrammatical choices that is the starting point for the representation, working backwards, as it were, to the generic concept "*possibility*" through a process of recursive superordination (where the superordinate concept is a shared component of meaning/usage and "*possibility*" is seen as the ultimate common conceptual component). The systems network below, therefore, derives ultimately from a linguistic not a formal logic and is quite different in appearance from usual such diagrams (particularly in Systemic Functional Linguistics; see Hasan and Perret 1994:211 for a specific example in relation to modality).

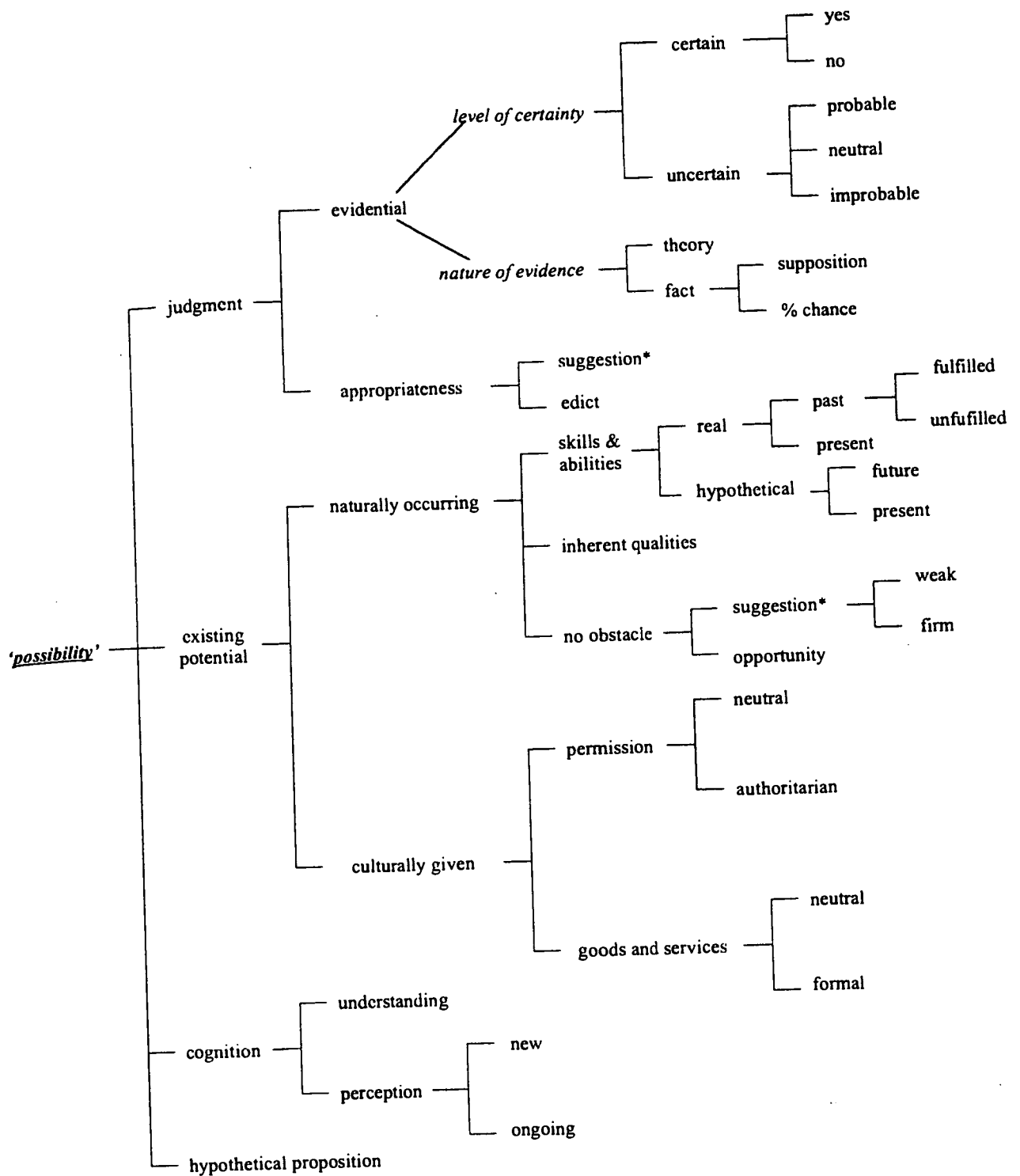


Figure 2. Situation-led system network for "possibility"

In other words, we have operating simultaneously a lexeme-led system (based on my lexemic meaning potential) and a situation-led system (based on Halliday's [situational] meaning potential). It is in the interaction of these two systems that the complex nature of, in this case, modality becomes clear.

4. Where meaning potentials meet

Figure 3 shows how each of the lexicogrammatical constructions which in figure 1 were shown as endpoints within a system of lexemic meaning potential (LMP) realise, as linguistic behaviour, social situations that themselves constitute the endpoints of a systems network of situational meaning potential (SMP). This represents a change from the method whereby situational meaning potential diagrams are constructed "logically" and where each endpoint is then given a distinct (if sometimes contrived) lexicogrammatical realisation. At times the natural language will not distinguish at the level of delicacy, nor according to the modes of logic, prescribed by such systems networks. If we accept that language is in a state of what Halliday calls "semiogenesis", i.e. LMPs are constantly being developed and modified according to changing SMPs, then it follows that at no time will a "logically" complete representation of meaning potential exist in the language (nor, of especial importance to communicative language teaching, will either SMP or LMP systems be universal). My approach favours beginning with language-in-use and discovering which situations a society truly differentiates between (an approach which also seems truer to the communicative approach in language teaching).

We can recognise so many endpoints of SMP by their differing lexicogrammatical realisations (the endpoints of the constitutive LMPs), which reflects the societal need to realise to a greater or lesser degree of delicacy the meaning potential of situations: SMP and LMP are respectively cause and effect of semiogenesis. This means that, synchronically, there is total overlap between the endpoints of the SMP and the LMP: only those situations that are distinguished lexicogramatically (including differences in intonation and Mood, e.g. question forms and negatives) will be recognised as distinct situations, while only those senses/uses of a lexeme that relate to different social situations will be recognised. This is exemplified in simplified form in figure three, which relates the SMP of "*possibility*" to the LMP of CAN, COULD and SHOULD (and, to simplify things further, without levels of delicacy shown for verbs of cognition as realised by CAN and COULD).

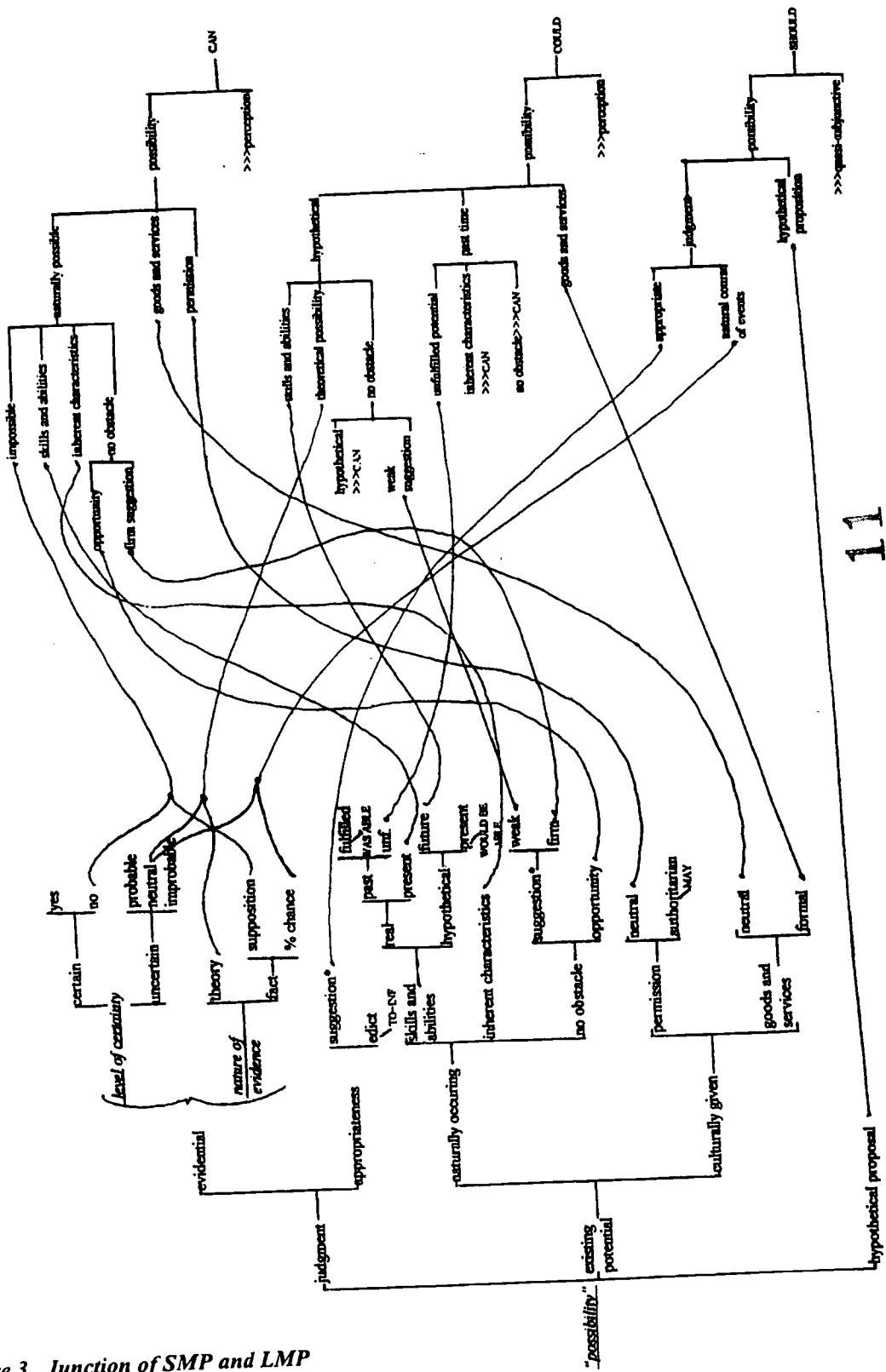


Figure 3. Junction of SMP and LMP

5. Lexicographical presentation of SMP and LMP

The above view of meaning potential and the links between motivated meaning within lexemes and systemic relations between lexemes has consequences for lexicographical presentation. One of the benefits of a motivated series of definitions is that, with regard to figure three, we can see not only what lexicogrammatical structure realises which SMP, but also *why* it does. It is important therefore that a dictionary entry also reflects this information. If a learner understands why a word means what it does and is used as it is, then this should lead to greater ease of acquisition and more accurate usage. As a consequence, in my sample entries each node within the LMP diagram is described in such a way that it is motivated by its mother node and motivates its own descendents. This can be achieved at various levels: with daughters being separate subdivisions where major usage/meaning differences are introduced; within subdivisions, for closely related usages; and through contrastive examples to capture the more nebulous relations and differences within what has been deemed a single sense or subsense.

Similarly, in order to present an appropriate level of systemic contrast, for the reasons discussed above, it will be necessary to highlight the differences in use/meaning between endpoints of the SMP that are sisters, as these are the areas that share the most characteristics, i.e. they have a common mother and are differentiated only by a single feature of delicacy, and are therefore most likely to be confused. Additionally, in figure 3 it will be seen that distant cousins may also share characteristics, i.e. the two endpoints labelled "suggestion" (asterisked in the figure). It is therefore also necessary to clarify and contrast the nature of "suggestion" in each case, with specific reference to the endpoint's SMP cousin, as has been exemplified with COULD above, or through implicit derivation from its LMP antecedents, as is the case with SHOULD below. Such contrast can be within the body of individual subdivisions using explicit information and examples of the contrasting features, or by use of crossreferencing, though this should be kept to a minimum.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that in order to obtain the understanding of a lexeme necessary "if one is to be accepted by the linguistic community as knowing the meaning of the word in question" (Geeraerts 1987:6, after Rosch and Putnam) a learner must know how its different senses are related through a core meaning and how it is related to and distinguished from other lexemes with similar semantic content: in other words, meaning is both inherent and contrastive. The tools I have used to exemplify these complementary characteristics are **motivation** and **systems networks** respectively. I have shown how the systems networks for lexemic meaning potential and situational meaning potential are interconnected, and asserted that different situations are best identified by their lexicogrammatical realisation and not vice-versa. Below are sample dictionary entries for the modal auxiliaries CAN, COULD and SHOULD that attempt to transfer the insights from these methods into a dictionary format aimed at learners within a TEFL environment. It should be noted that the following sample entries are not designed for any concrete teaching level or situation: the level of metalanguage is fairly advanced, yet one of the basic premises of this paper is that definition through motivation and system is a basic and essential aspect of lexis, not a specialisation or refinement. These samples are, then, no more than a theoretical representation of my conclusions in a lexicographical format, a basis which genuine teaching materials might adopt and adapt to particular needs and purposes.

7. Sample entries

The following sample entries are modifications of those presented in my M.Sc. thesis, simplified to exemplify the ideas of motivation and system while omitting other aspects of syntax, modality and meaning.

can

core meaning: CAN suggests that something is possible for various reasons. CAN'T and CANNOT mean that something is not possible.

meaning A: CAN means that something is naturally possible. It can be used:

1. – to talk about a person's skills and abilities, permanent or otherwise: *Can you swim?/I can't drink any more.*

2. – to say that something sometimes happens because of inherent or natural qualities of people or things: *Can white be green?/Sore breasts can be really painful.* It is used in the interrogative to express surprise that something is possible: *How can you be so stupid?/Can he really be in London?/How can you expect me to believe your promises?* **In contrast with** COULD, MAY and MIGHT, which refer to a situation that you think is possibly true at the moment, CAN refers to something that is sometimes but not always true. If the doctor told you: *This disease might be fatal.* it would worry you more than: *This disease can be fatal.* **Compare with meaning E.**

3. – to say that nothing prevents something from happening at the moment or that you have the option of doing something: *You can smile again./I can barely afford to pay the rent./the statue which can still be seen in the British Museum* This form is sometimes used to insist forcefully that something will happen: *They can have their tea at home! – They can, but they're not going to!*

4. – CAN'T is used to say that in your opinion something is not possibly true at the moment **in contrast with** MUST, which means you are sure it is true, COULD, MAY and MIGHT, which mean you think it is possibly true, and MAY NOT and MIGHT NOT, which mean you think it is possibly not true: *He can't be there yet./He must be there by now./He might not survive the operation.* **Compare with meaning A2.**

meaning B: CAN is used in the interrogative form to make a request. It is not formal, **in contrast with** COULD and MAY in the same situation: *Can we have a copy?/Could I possibly try some?*

meaning C: CAN is used to make an offer, occasionally on someone else's behalf. It is not formal **in contrast with** COULD in the same situation: *What can we do for you?/Can my brother help?/I can pop into the shops for you tomorrow, if you like./I could lend you my car.*

meaning D: CAN is used to give or request permission. It is a neutral term, though some people think it is informal. CAN implies that the person is able to do something themselves, while MAY, **in contrast**, is more authoritarian and shows that the person giving permission is in control: *Can I ask you a question?/May I leave the room?* Sometimes this form is a rude way of telling an inferior to do something: *You can go now.* CAN'T, **in contrast**, is a more forceful way of asking for something: *Can't I have a biscuit?* Sometimes society in general allows something to happen or not, or you use CAN'T or CANNOT to say you think society must not let it happen: *You can't have a drink with your ex-wife./It is an intolerable situation and it cannot be allowed to go on.*

meaning E: CAN is used with verbs of perception and understanding. With verbs of understanding the meaning is the same as with the present simple; with verbs of perception CAN implies an ongoing situation **in contrast with** the present simple, which implies that the perception is new: *I can see the bruise on your chin./I see him now!/We can all remember it.*

could

core meaning: COULD suggests that something was or would be possible for various reasons. COULDN'T and COULD NOT mean that something was not or would not be possible.

meaning A: COULD means that something is hypothetically possible, or possible in an imagined situation. It can be used:

1. – to talk about someone's imagined skills or abilities, permanent or otherwise: COULD refers to a possible future ability, *in contrast with* WOULD BE ABLE TO, which refers to a hypothetical ability in the present. **Refer to ABLE, meaning X:** *If you taught me, I could swim by Christmas./ If you had taught me, I would be able to swim by now.* It is also used in exclamations to say that it would be possible for you to do something because of high emotions: *I could strangle her!*

2. [grammar note: this form is potentially ambiguous with meaning B2. Refer to this.] – to say that you think something is possibly true at the moment, *in contrast with:* MUST, which means you are certain that something is true and CAN'T or COULDN'T, which mean you are certain that something is not true. CAN is used to say that something is sometimes but not always true, and SHOULD is used to say that you think that something is probably true because it is the natural course of events: *That's a Japanese dog isn't it? – It could well be./Could it happen again?/ He must be in – his light's on/She couldn't possibly be home yet./He can't be serious!/Sore breasts can be really painful./She left at eight, so she should be home by now.* COULD HAVE is used to refer to a past event that you think is possibly true: *He could have been there a week./It could have been anything that started that off./I could hardly have been up a tree!*

3. – to say that nothing would prevent something from happening in a particular situation: *We could allow him access to anything that's not copyright./You could never lie to me could you?/Could you fly from Ireland to Honduras?* COULDN'T is used to say you are not going to do something because you find it offensive, unfair or morally wrong – or simply impossible: *I couldn't do that to my own brother!./ I couldn't possibly have any more!* COULD HAVE is used to say that something was possible in the past, but that the event did not happen: *I could have gone for longer./You could have been sitting in here./I could have cried!* Sometimes this form is used to suggest that something is a possible choice, *in contrast with* SHOULD, which is used to say something is the appropriate action: *Perhaps we could discuss this after dinner./You could always drop them a line./You should explain.* Sometimes this form or is used to complain that someone is not doing or did not do something: *You could try and help!./Could you tidy up after yourself?/You could have told me!*

meaning B: COULD means that something was possible. In these senses it is a past form of CAN, meanings A. It can be used:

1. – to talk about a person's past skills and abilities, permanent or otherwise: *I could speak French as a boy./I couldn't stop thinking about her.* *In contrast with* COULD, which refers to a continuing state, WAS ABLE TO refers to an action that was actually carried out. **Refer to ABLE, meaning X:** *He asked me if there was anything he could do./It was the least we could do/What could they say?/I could not talk to them the same as before./I could almost touch it with my own hands./I'd tried everything that I could think of to get these people to move./I was able to escape while the guard was asleep.*

2. [grammar note: this form is potentially ambiguous with meaning A2. Refer to this.] – to talk about inherent or natural qualities of people or things in the past or the way the world was: *Asthma could be deadly when I was young./He could be very pleasant when he wanted to.* It is also used in the interrogative form to express surprise that something is possible: *How could you be so stupid?/How could you have lied to us all these years?* COULD refers to something that was sometimes but not always true *in contrast with* COULD HAVE, MAY HAVE and MIGHT HAVE,

which refer to a situation in the past that you think is possibly true at the moment: *His light's off - he could have gone to bed.*

3. - to say that nothing prevented something from happening at a particular time or that someone had the option of doing something: *Once he had gone I could get on with my normal life.* The interrogative negative form is used with WHY to express annoyance that someone did not do something: *Why couldn't he tell me straight out?*

meaning C: COULD is used to make polite request or offers, occasionally on someone else's behalf: *Michael, dear, could you come down for a moment?/I don't suppose my friend could borrow your car, could he?/ Could you help me, please?/I could pop into the shops for you tomorrow, if you like./My dad could help you.* This form is also used for polite imperatives: *Could we do this a little later, do you think?* COULDN'T, in contrast, is a more forceful way of asking for something: *Couldn't we finish the lesson now?*

meaning D: COULD is used with verbs of perception and understanding. Here it is the past tense of CAN, **meaning F.** With verbs of cognition the meaning is the same as with the past simple; with verbs of perception COULD implies an ongoing situation in contrast with the past simple, which implies that the perception was new: *I could see the bruise on your chin./Suddenly I saw him!/He could recognise some of the circumstances./We could all understand her problem.*

should

meaning A: SHOULD is generally used to say that you think something is to be expected, either because it is considered appropriate behaviour by the speaker or society as a whole or because it is, in the speaker's opinion, the most natural course of events. SHOULD is used:

1. - to say that you think something is or would be appropriate behaviour: *Ideally this should be objective and give quantitative data./The manager thought that I should not leave.* Often SHOULD is used in giving or seeking advice: *You should also edit the final copy./I should go if I were you./I should forget it./You should not be such a sceptic!/Should I call the police?* In contrast, if we wish to say that something is necessary, rather than just advisable, we use MUST; if we think that an action is neither good nor bad we can use the expression MIGHT AS WELL, and if we think there might be unpleasant consequences if the advice is not followed we use HAD BETTER, sometimes as a threat: *You must stop smoking if you want to avoid a heart attack./I might as well leave it till tomorrow./You'd better not come round here again!* SHOULDN'T can be used to make a suggestion less forceful: *Shouldn't you switch it off first?* SHOULD HAVE is usually used to suggest an appropriate situation when you think something wrong has happened, but it can also be used to say that you think that what happened was appropriate: *I should have been more disciplined./I should not have spoken./He acted exactly as he should have.* It can also be used to say that someone missed something that you think they would have enjoyed: *You should have heard what Harold told me!*

2. - to say that you think something is seen as the natural course of events. *She left at eight, so she should be home by now./He reckons I should get £650./Roses shouldn't really grow in this climate - but they do!* SHOULD HAVE means that something was the natural course of events, usually when it has not happened or when you do not know if it has happened: *Muskie should have won by a huge margin./Dear Mom, you should have heard that I am O.K. by now.* In contrast, COULD is used to say that you think something is possibly true, and WILL or PROBABLY are used if you are fairly sure of something but do not know for certain that it is true: *Could it happen again?/I'll probably be home at five./ That'll be John at the door.*

meaning B: SHOULD can be used to talk formally about imagined or hypothetical events or ideas:

1. – instead of WOULD in conditional clauses after I or WE: *What would you do if it were denied? – I should sit here just the same. /I should appreciate it if you could all be quiet.*
2. – after IF to show that an idea is not very likely: *Do you know what it would mean if these pictures should ever fall into the hands of the newspapers?* [grammar note: In formal language SHOULD and the main verb can be inverted to form the conditional clause. In this case the negative is formed by placing NOT between the subject and the main verb]: *They will go to the top of Division One should they win at Nottingham Forest./ Please feel free to call should you not hear from us within 15 days.* These usages suggest that the events involves are unlikely and are being discussed as no more than ideas.
3. – after a THAT clause to express somebody's attitudes or feelings towards the idea that something has happened or might happen: *She was anxious that we should know something about the arts./It's funny that we should get there this season./There's no reason why it should be so funny./He suggested I should apply to Lara. In contrast, the proposal is less definite either in the informal He suggested I applied to Lara. or the formal He suggested I apply to Lara.*

meaning C: SHOULD is occasionally used in reported speech as the past tense of SHALL,
meaning A. Refer to this: *They promised that he should have an ice-cream when he got home.*

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