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Antonymy and Semantic Range in English

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## ABSTRACT

### Antonymy and Semantic Range in English

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This dissertation investigates what makes two words antonyms. Previous research has not adequately explained why some words seem to contrast in meaning but are still not considered antonyms (e.g. *large* and *little*) nor can it explain why some words have two antonyms (e.g., *happy/sad* and *happy/unhappy*). An explanation is given here using the notion of "semantic range" (a description of a word's typical collocation patterns); antonyms are shown to be words which have a great deal of semantic range in common.

In the first chapter, previous characterizations of antonymy are reviewed, and on the basis of their limitations, a new characterization of antonymy in terms of shared semantic range is proposed. This proposal is developed and argued for in the following three chapters, each of which is an in-depth case study. The second chapter presents the adjectives *big*, *little*, *large*, and *small*, focusing on the question of why *little* and *large* are not antonyms even though they name opposite ends of the semantic dimension of size and even though the pairs *big/little*, *large/small* and *big/small* are all antonyms. The third chapter examines several adjectives related to the concepts of wetness and dryness--*wet*, *damp*, *moist*, *dank*, *humid*, *dry*, *arid* and *parched*--and explains why of these, only *wet* and *dry* are antonyms. The fourth chapter explores the adjective *happy* and its two antonyms, *unhappy* and *sad*.

In each case study, the semantic range of each adjective is characterized in terms of the kinds of nouns which it typically modifies, and then the semantic ranges of the adjectives under consideration are compared. Adjective-noun

co-occurrence patterns from a large corpus are used as the main source of data. When the semantic ranges are compared, antonyms are found to be adjectives which have a high degree of overlap in semantic range; for example, *big/little*, *large/small*, and *big/small* are found to share a great deal of semantic range but *large* and *little* have almost no shared semantic range and thus are not antonyms.

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