Chapter 8
On Cups

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Abstract This essay surveys and critically comments upon four lexicographic (semantic) descriptions offered for the English noun *cup*. Labov (New ways of analyzing variation in English. Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., pp. 340–73, 1973), Katz (Philos Stud 31: 1–80, 1977), Wierzbicka (Aust J Linguistics 4: 257–281, 1984), Goddard (Semantic analysis: a practical introduction. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011), all restricted themselves to tea/coffee cups. The *Oxford English Dictionary* allows for other kinds of cups as well, including acorn-cups, and bra-cups. This essay offers an alternative account of what is common to the different denotata for the word *cup*: all but one kind are hollow hemispheroids. It speculates on the relevance of cupped hands in the sizing of cups, and finally proposes that a proper semantics for *cup* should be cognisant of the lexical extensions discussed here.

Keywords Breast volume · Containers · Hemispheroid · Lexical extension · Lexicography · Semantics

8.1 Introduction

It will be shown that, with one exception (see (52)), the criterial characteristic of a cup is that it is configured as a hollow hemispheroid (a half sphere) with a diameter

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greater than or equal to its depth. The salient (or default)[1] meaning for *cup* is of a drinking vessel that is an impermeable oblate hemispheroid (a squashed half sphere), i.e. a container for liquid with a capacity of about 250 ml. Such cups are very possibly modelled on a human's cupped hands.[2] Both the two human hands cupped together and a single cupped hand are (if we ignore the attached arm) similar in shape to a hollow oblate hemispheroid. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) does not list cupping one's hands together, but a good definition for this idiom occurs in the Free Dictionary online:

> **cup (one's) hands together** To hold one's hands together to catch something (typically a liquid) in them. *I cupped my hands together under the running water and splashed my face.*
>
> (*Farlex Idioms and Slang Dictionary* 2017)

The variation I would offer on the definition of *to cup one's hands* (*together*) is: To hold one's hands together into a cup-shape to catch something (typically a liquid) in them. *To cup one's ear* is: To form a hand into a cup-shape with the thumb behind the ear.

A typical cup (I prefer the term *typical* to *prototypical* or *stereotypical* for reasons explained in Allan 2001: 334–336) holds around 250 millilitres, which is similar to the capacity of adult male cupped hands. A single hand cupped holds around 125 ml, roughly equivalent to the capacity of an espresso coffee cup (demitasse) or a traditional Chinese or Middle-Eastern tea or coffee cup—which is bowl-like (i.e. handle-less). Thus, a typical cup, which, for instance, Americans, Australians, British, and Poles (among many others) use for tea, coffee, and other hot drinks, is a hollow oblate hemispheroid impermeable container with a flat base at the pole so that it can easily stand alone; it is open at the wide end for easy access by human lips to the liquid it contains. It is designed to be readily manipulated by the thumb and fingers of a single human hand. A rectangular cup is atypical because it would be comparatively impracticable as a drinking vessel, but nonetheless it could function as a cup. However, I will ignore such monstrosities in this essay.

[1] What qualifies something to become the default is its salience in the absence of any contextual motivation to prefer an alternative. Giora (2003: 34, 37) defines salience as what is foremost in the mind based on 'such factors as familiarity, conventionality, and frequency of occurrence'. This applies to lexicon entries which comprehend as wide a range of contexts as possible; the default meaning is that one which is utilized more frequently by more people and normally with greater certitude than any alternative. Thus, default meanings are largely similar to salient meanings except that the latter, according to Giora, are foremost in the mind of an individual: 'Salience […] is relative to an individual. What is foremost on one's mind need not necessarily be foremost on another's' (Giora 2003: 37). We can distinguish between a linguist's model of the mental lexicon as an abstraction or generalization over the hypothetical lexicon of a typical individual and the real-life internalized lexicon of particular individuals in which different meanings may be salient because of each individual's unique experience.

[2] I am not suggesting that the lexical derivation went in this direction; it certainly did not.

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8.2 Lexicographic Descriptions of Cups

In Sect. 8.2, I review lexicographic descriptions of cups by William Labov, Jerrold J. Katz, the *OED*, and Cliff Goddard. The focus is on dictionary meaning, which is a kind of informal semantic description.

8.2.1 Labov

In the early 1970s William Labov sought to differentiate cups from mugs and proposed the following denotation conditions on *cup*—which are equivalent to a lexicographic description.

> The term *cup* is regularly used to denote round containers with a ratio of width to depth of $1 \pm r$ where $r \leq r_b$, and $r_b = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 + \ldots \alpha_v$ and α_1 is a positive quantity when the feature *i* is present and 0 otherwise.
> feature 1 = with one handle
> 2 = made of opaque vitreous material
> 3 = used for consumption of food
> 4 = used for consumption of liquid food
> 5 = used for consumption of hot liquid food
> 6 = with a saucer
> 7 = tapering
> 8 = circular in cross-section
> *Cup* is used variably to denote such containers with ratios of width to depth of $1 \pm r$ where $r_b \leq r \leq r_t$ with a probability of $r_t - r/r_t - r_b$. The quantity $r \pm r_b$ expresses the distance from the modal value of width to height.
>
> (Labov 1973: 366f)

To properly interpret r_b and r_t (and subsequently r) it is useful to appeal to Labov's figure for the invariant core and variable range for the denotation of items (i.e. potential cups) by speakers.

We see from Fig. 8.1 that all seven speakers (a sample of fluent English speakers) categorise items a–d as *cup* (on the basis of ratio of width to depth) but fewer than half of them categorise items a–h as *cup*; no one finds item k to be a cup. Thus, according to Labov, the boundary, r, of what counts as a cup lies somewhere between items e and j.

Labov's account of the lexical semantics of *cup* incorporates the configuration (features 1, 7, 8 in the description quoted), material of construction (feature 2), function (features 3, 4, 5), a characteristic supplement (6), and a fuzzy boundary feature, which is bound to the configuration expressed as the probable value of $r_t - r/r_t - r_b$ based on samples of speaker judgment. All five of these characteristics are relevant, but Labov limits himself to only the salient kind of *cup*—the (American,

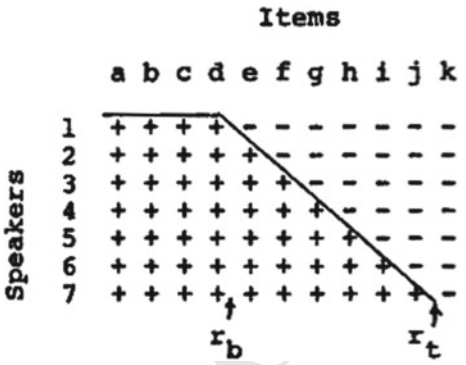

Fig. 8.1 Core and range for the denotation of items (Fig. 19 in Labov 1973: 368)

etc.) drinking vessel. The salient/default meaning refers to the first concept/image of a cup that comes to mind when the word *cup* is uttered (or, simply, cognized) outside of some particular context. By contrast with this, for example in a sporting context, the salient cup is chalice-like and usually much larger than the typical 250 ml capacity tea or coffee cup.

8.2.2 Katz

Take the following 'dictionary representation' of *cup* given by Jerrold J. Katz:

1. Physical Object
2. Inanimate
3. Vertical Orientation
4. Upwardly concave
5. Height about equal to top diameter
6. Top diameter greater than bottom diameter
7. Artefact
8. Made to serve as a container from which to drink liquid.

(Katz 1977: 49. The line numbering is added.)

Katz's description seems adequate and very much simpler than Labov's 'denotation conditions'. It is, however, once again limited to the salient drinking *cup.* The ontology of a cup is identified in lines 1, 2, and 7. Configuration is specified in 3, 4, 5, and 6. Function is given in feature 8. The material from which a cup is constructed is unspecified but is implied by 8.

8.2.3 OED

If anything, the meaning given for the salient sense of *cup* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is simpler still:

> **1.** A small open vessel for liquids, usually of hemispherical or hemi-spheroidal shape, with or without a handle; a drinking-vessel. The common form of cup (*e.g.* a tea-cup or coffee-cup) has no stem; but the larger and more ornamental forms (*e.g.* a wine-cup or chalice) may have a stem and foot, as also a lid or cover; in such cases *cup* is sometimes applied specifically to the concave part that receives the liquid.

The *OED* also admits of other kinds of cups, which I shall discuss in Sect. 8.3.

8.2.4 Goddard

Let us next consider an elaborate semantics for *cup* presented in Goddard (2011). It is a version revised from a similar account in Goddard (1998) which itself is modelled on the 830 word lexicographic description (semantics) for *cup* given in Wierzbicka (1984). I have examined Wierzbicka's account in some detail in Allan (2021) and won't do so here; instead I prefer to examine the account in Goddard (2011) because it is (a) more recent than Wierzbicka's and (b) more closely sticks to the principles of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) which Wierzbicka (1984) supposedly uses, but in fact does not. The expressions used in a semantic representation in NSM are supposed to match those that (a) children acquire early and (b) have counterparts in all languages (Goddard 1994: 12). NSM is deliberately anthropocentric and subjective, referring to the natural world of sensory experience rather than intellectualized abstractions; thus, *red* is described as the colour of blood (Wierzbicka 1980, 1990) or fire (Wierzbicka 1990, 1992) rather than as an electromagnetic wave focally around 695 nanometres in length. Here is Goddard's semantics for *cup* to which I have, for convenience in discussion, added numbers (1–44).

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(1) *a cup:*
(2) FUNCTIONAL CATEGORY
(3) a. something of one kind
(4) at many times people do something with something of this kind when they are drinking [m] something hot [m]
(5) when someone is drinking [m] something like this, before it is inside this someone's mouth [m], it is for some time inside something of this kind

(6) SIZE
(7) b. things of this kind are like this:
(8) – they are not big
(9) – someone can hold [m] one in one hand [m]

(10) PART FOR HOLDING
(11) many things of this kind have a small thin [m] part on one side
101
(12) when someone is drinking [m], this someone can hold [m] this part with the fingers [m] of one hand [m]

(13) OTHER PARTS
(14) the other parts are like this:
(15) – the sides [m] are like the sides [m] of something round [m]
(16) – they are thin [m]
(17) – the top [m] part of the sides has a smooth [m] round [m] edge [m]
(18) – the bottom [m] part of something of this kind is flat [m]
(19) – someone can think that the bottom [m] part is small, if this someone thinks about the top [m] part at the same time

(20) MATERIAL
(21) things of this kind are made of [m] something hard [m]
(22) this something is smooth [m]

(23) USE SEQUENCE

(24) c. when someone is doing something with something of this kind because this someone is drinking [m] something hot [m], it happens like this:

(25) – at some time this something is in one place for some time, at this time the bottom [m] part is touching something flat [m]

(26) – at this time there is something like hot [m] water [m] inside this thing

(27) – it can be tea [m], it can be coffee [m], it can be something of another kind

(28) – it is inside this thing because some time before someone did some things because this someone wanted it to be like this

(29) – after this, someone picks up [m] this something with the fingers [m] of one hand [m]

(30) – after this, this someone does something else to it with the hand [m]

(31) – after this, because of this, part of the edge [m] at the top [m] of this thing touches one of this someone's lips [m] for a short time, as this someone wants

(32) – during this time, this someone's fingers [m] move as this someone wants

(33) – because of this, a little bit of something like hot [m] water [m) moves, as this someone wants

102 (34) – because of this, after this it is not inside this thing anymore, it is inside this someone's mouth [m]

(35) – after this, this someone puts [m] this thing down [m] on something flat [m]

(36) – after this, this someone can do this a few more times

(37) SAUCER

(38) sometimes when someone is drinking [m] something in this way, this someone wants not to hold [m] this thing for a short time

(39) when it is like this, this someone can put [m] this thing down [m] on something of another kind, in the middle [m] of this other kind of thing

(40) these other things are made of [m] the same hard [m], smooth [m] stuff

(41) they are round [m], they are flat [m]

(42) the edge [m] of something or this kind is above the middle [m]

(43) ARTEFACT STATUS

(44) d. many people want to drink [m] things of some kinds like this at many times because of this, some people make [m] things of this kind

(Goddard 2011: 228–229)

103 In addition to so-called 'semantic primes' such as SOMETHING, THINGS, KIND,
104 MANY, PEOPLE, TIMES, etc. Goddard's analysis includes 'semantic molecules' such
105 as 'fingers', 'hand', 'drinking', 'making' things, and being 'hot' or 'hard', which are
106 marked by a subsequent [m].

> These are non-primitive meanings (hence, ultimately decomposable into semantic primes) that can function as units in the semantic structure of other, yet more complex words. […] Semantic molecules must be meanings of lexical units in the language concerned.
>
> From a conceptual point of view, the NSM claim is that some complex concepts are semantically dependent on other less complex, but still non-primitive, concepts. For example, semantic explications for words like *sparrow* and *eagle* include 'bird' as a semantic molecule; the cognitive claim is that the concept of *sparrow* includes and depends on the concept of 'bird'. In this case, the relationship is taxonomic: *sparrows* and *eagles* are both 'birds [m] of one kind' (molecules are marked in explications with the notation [m]).
>
> (Goddard 2010: 124)

Although it is said that all semantic molecules are reducible to semantic primes, this has only been demonstrated for a few (e.g. Goddard 2011: 125–130).

Long though it is, Goddard's semantics for *cup* has only 66 paragraphs instead of the 76 in Wierzbicka (1984). Nevertheless, it includes some extraneous information while at the same time omitting some criterial information. It is sectioned into four parts: (a), (2–5), identifies a cup's primary function. (b), (6–22), describes the configuration of a typical cup and the material from which it is made. (c), (23–42), describes how a cup is used and what it is used for, then brings in saucers; and (d), (43–44), says the cups are in wide use and many are manufactured.

(2–5) identify a cup as, primarily, a vessel for containing hot liquid. Although true, this characteristic is not a critical characteristic of cups. It may well be that this is one motivation for attaching handles to cups, nevertheless, a drinking vessel properly-named *cup* may lack handles. (6–19) identify the typical configuration: a cup is the kind of thing (7–9) that can be held by the fingers of one hand, for which reason it has a handle (10–12)—though again this is not a necessary accessory to a cup. A cup is a hollow oblate hemispheroid with a flat bottom (13–19). (20–22) describe the material from which a cup is made as smooth and hard. It is not specifically noted that, necessarily, the material from which a cup is constructed is impermeable. (23–36) describe the use of a cup for the drinking of hot liquid (24, 26), mentioning that a cup is several times raised to the lips for drinking (31, 36) and lowered onto a flat surface (25, 35): although commonly true, (23–36) carry superfluous information that has no part in defining what a cup is. (37–42) describe the configuration and constituency of a saucer but fail to offer a satisfactory account of a saucer's function. Finally, (43–44), says that because people like drinking hot liquids, cups are manufactured to that purpose. I re-affirm my earlier comment that cups are occasionally used for cool and cold liquids.

Wierzbicka (1984) was explicitly a refutation of Labov's denotation conditions for *cup* (Labov 1973: 366f, quoted above), on the grounds that they 'need the help of a mathematician to understand' them and do not give the lexicographic meaning (Wierzbicka 1984: 207). She claims 'the denotation conditions can be deduced from the meaning' (1984: 209) and Goddard supports this view. An important question arises about the playoff between the effectiveness of a definition and its accuracy.

What is the purpose of the semantic or lexicographic description? Who or what is the lexicographic/semantic specification that results from the analyses in this essay designed for? Anyone capable of reading any of the descriptions of *cup* presented here will already know what a cup is, so a brief and accurate description is all that is necessary; as Alan Cruse once wrote: 'For dictionary purposes, the concept has only to be identified, not fully specified' (Cruse 1990: 396). In my own account of the semantics of *cup* (below, (45)–(46)) I do identify the concept and furthermore specify it fully for the more commonly denoted kinds of cup.

8.3 A New(ish) Proposal

First, a bit of history. Based on dates in the *OED*, the earliest uses of *cup*—around 1000 CE—are for the drinking vessel. The extension to acorn-cups dates from around 1500; the extension to bra-cups not until the 1930s. Medieval cups were more like bowls, mugs, tankards, and goblets than the shapes described by Labov, Katz, Wierzbicka, and Goddard. The traditional Chinese and Japanese tea cups traded to Europe in the 16th century were bowl-like and the earliest European copies were similar. Handles only began to be attached to cups in Europe in the early 18th century; saucers appeared around the same time.

Although the salient cup (for e.g. Americans, Australians, British, Poles, among many others) is the kind of drinking vessel described by Labov, Katz, Wierzbicka, and Goddard and discussed above, there are other applications of the noun.

> **4.** A natural organ or formation having the form of a drinking-cup; *e.g.* the rounded cavity or socket of certain bones, as the shoulder-blade and hip-bone; the cup-shaped hardened involucrum (cupule) of an acorn (*acorn-cup*); the calyx of a flower, also the blossom itself when cup-shaped; a cup-shaped organ in certain Fungi, or on the suckers of certain Molluscs; a depression in the skin forming a rudimentary eye in certain lower animals (also *eye-cup* or *cup-eye*).
>
> **[6]c.** That part of a brassière which is shaped to contain or support one of the breasts.
>
> (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

In the light of these quotations, I re-affirm that the criterial characteristic of the denotatum of *cup* is that it is a hollow hemispheroid in form. And note that there is even a partial overlap between the capacity/volume of the drinking cup and the bra-cup. Although bra sizes are not universally standardised, a AA cup is around 125 ml and a B cup around 250 ml; however, any match is complicated by the fact that band size also needs to be taken into account: 'For example, a 12D cup is approximately 350 ml while a 16D corresponds to 1,100 ml' (Mcghee and Steele 2011: 356). Like other items of clothing the configuration of the bra is determined by the configuration

of the human body, consequently bra cups are paired, typically connected by a band below that circles the chest.

In offering my own account of the semantics of *cup* I seek to capture the characteristics of the drinking vessels referred to as cups and also the two extensions of the term *cup* to bra cups and acorn cups.

(45) IF something is properly called a *cup* it is a hollow hemispheroid usually with a diameter greater than or equal to its depth GOTO (46) ELSE (52).

(46) IF the *cup* is a flat-bottomed hollow oblate hemispheroidal drinking vessel[3] it is a tea/coffee/etc. cup ELSE.

(47) IF the *cup* is a flat-bottomed hollow oblate hemispheroidal drinking vessel with a vertical handle and a capacity of about 250 ml, it is a typical Western style tea/coffee/etc. cup that is typically accompanied by a matching saucer ELSE.

(48) IF the *cup* is a flat-bottomed hollow oblate hemispheroidal drinking vessel with a vertical handle and a capacity of about 125 ml, it is a typical Western espresso style coffee cup (demitasse) that is often accompanied by a matching saucer ELSE.

(49) IF the *cup* is a flat-bottomed hollow oblate hemispheroidal drinking vessel with a capacity of about 125 ml, it is a typical Chinese style tea cup and/or a typical Middle-Eastern style tea/coffee cup ELSE.

(50) IF the *cup* is a hollow oblate hemispheroid made of fabric and one of a pair that constitute the principal parts of a brassiere, each cup being shaped to contain and support one of a woman's breasts ELSE.

(51) IF the *cup* is a hollow oblate hemispheroid that forms the woody seat of an acorn (its cupule) it is an acorn-cup END.

The relevance of any particular condition (45)–(52) depends on context and consequent suppression of inappropriate conditions (see Allan 2020 for more on context and Gernsbacher 1990 on suppression of inappropriate conditions). For example, if the relevant context is a garment, then (50) will be selected and conditions (46)–(49) and (51)–(52) will be suppressed. If the context is drinking then all of conditions (46)–(49) and (52) are relevant and the particular condition must determined by other contextual factors such as configuration. The 'END' command in (51) is strictly incorrect because there are additional possibilities such as the rounded cavity or socket of certain bones, the calyx of a flower, also the blossom itself when cup-shaped, a cup-shaped organ in certain fungi, or on the suckers of certain molluscs, and a depression in the skin forming a rudimentary eye in certain lower animals (*OED*).

Although the primary motivation for what has become a standard for drinking cup sizes is their functionality as manipulable with a single hand by an adult human, it is likely that the cup's volume of about 250 ml is modelled on the volume of the two cupped human hands while the volume of about 125 ml is modelled on the volume of a single cupped human hand.[4] The fact that the cups manufactured for human use only approximate the standard cup sizes matches the fact that human hand sizes vary a great deal, with consequent variation in their cupped volume.

[3] And therefore impermeable.

[4] It is interesting that by Middle Eastern tradition using the left hand when eating is tabooed, so only the cupped right hand would be acceptable in drinking. Could this influence the standard Middle Eastern cup size? Perhaps, but a similar argument fails for Chinese teacups.

The 'ELSE' command in (45) directs to (52):

(52) IF the *cup* is a flat-bottomed hollow tapered cylindrical drinking vessel having a diameter less than its depth and made of water-proof paper, plastic, polystyrene, or similar material with a capacity between approximately 250–500ml, it is a throw-away cup that typically lacks a handle and invariably lacks a saucer.

Throw-away (disposable/take-away) cups are tapered by approximately 5 degrees from the vertical in order to facilitate stacking before use. Being cylindrical and not hemispheroidal as well as usually having a diameter less than its depth, a throw-away cup is more similar in shape to a mug than the default cup and this begs the question of how they come to be called 'cups' and not 'mugs'. The only feasible answer lies with (46): the salience of *cup* as the default term for the vessel for drinking tea, coffee, hot chocolate and the like—i.e. the name is determined by the principal function of the denotatum rather than its shape.[5] Although the typical (drinking vessel) cup is an oblate hemispheroid, in reality some are (hollow) cylinders. Being cylindrical, they are similar to short mugs because although some mugs are (hollow) prolate hemispheroids, most are shell cylinders; the principal difference between cylindrical cups and mugs is that whereas the diameter of the upper rim of the cup is approximately equal to or greater than the cup's height, the height of a mug is greater than, and often much greater than, its diameter.

8.4 Conclusions

In this essay I have compared several accounts of a lexicographic description (informal semantics) for *cup* with the aim of comparing their adequacy. The several accounts are constructed for different reasons and none of them (not even mine) is fully adequate as a complete semantic/lexicographic account of the English word *cup*. Only one, that of Goddard (2011), can properly claim to be presented within a particular theory of semantics—in other words to form part of a set of such semantic/lexicographic descriptions. I don't have the space to argue the point here, but I do not believe that a claim to superiority on this basis has any validity at all: I admire the attempt, but the demonstrated inadequacy of (1)–(44), the fact that it differs from Goddard (1998) and Wierzbicka (1984), make vacuous any claim to superiority simply on grounds of its adherence to a particular linguistic theory (see Allan 2008 for comments on NSM). I could have attempted to write (45)

[5]The slightly old-fashioned idiom *be in one's cups* meaning "drunk" also derives from the salience of *cup* as a drinking vessel. Cups are rarely used for alcoholic drinks, which are normally served in glasses, (beer-)mugs, bottles, or cans.

using more formal expressions such as ∀(x)[*cup*(x) → λ(y)[HOLLOW(y) & HEMISPHEROID(y)](x)],[6] but these formalisms invariably need to be translated back into everyday informal language in order to be comprehensively understood by most of humanity.

We have seen that a lexical form such as *cup* is applied (not necessarily figuratively) to a variety of denotata whose differences create extensions to the meaning of the lexical item. This is commonplace: the word *window*, for instance, was originally applied to a wooden shutter that let light and air into a home (a wind-door); today *window* denotes a functionally similar but visually and cognitively distinct transparent screen of glass in a frame. These sorts of examples demonstrate one kind of within-language change over time. A topically relevant example of cross-language change is the fact that English *cup* derives indirectly from Latin *cuppa* "barrel, cask"—a vessel with a capacity at least 500 times greater than 250 ml.

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[6] See Allan (2020) for many examples. There is also the conundrum that HEMISPHEROID is a more complex and rarer concept than CUP.

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