

What's the *real* thing? Paradoxes and prototypes of an English adjective

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Abstract

In this preliminary survey of the adjective *real*, corpus data are used to describe its collocational properties. The meaning of *real* may seem to vary in a paradoxical manner, in that “real things” are sometimes those that are natural and sometimes those that are unnatural. In an attempt to reconcile its apparent inconsistencies in meaning I make a distinction between how *real* is used with reference to artifacts and to natural objects. Another distinction is made between whether speakers categorize objects on a prototypical or on a truth-conditional basis.

1 Introduction

The following analysis of *real* will consider its general properties as an adjective. It will also focus on grammatical and lexical contexts to find clues towards its semantic analysis. Since the position of a word in a network determines what choices are available in its semantic neighbourhood, the lexico-semantic relations of *real* in terms of synonymy, antonymy and hyponymy are also important for an exhaustive analysis (for current work on lexico-semantic networks cf. Fellbaum 1998; Faber & Mairal 1999; Fillmore 2002). These, however, will not be included in the discussion at this preliminary stage.

Ideally, then, an analysis of the meaning and use of the word *real* deals with the following parameters, although in this study the third parameter has been left out:

- The categorial meaning of *real*. What adjectival properties contribute to its meaning?
- The syntagmatic relations of *real*. What combinatorial properties, syntactic as well as lexical, contribute to its meaning?

- The paradigmatic relations of *real*. What are its relations to other lexical items in the lexico-semantic network?

2 Material

The following types of data have been used:

Dictionary: *The COBUILD English Dictionary*

Grammars: *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*; *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*; *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*

Corpus data: *British National Corpus Version 1.0* (Oxford 1995) for syntagmatic relations like collocations and syntactic constructions

Introspection

The concordancing programme used to retrieve data for this study was *Mono-Conc Pro 2.0*, which produces both KWIC concordances and statistical information. It handles both tagged and untagged corpora of most kinds and is supported by Windows OS.

Any study of this kind is at some stage likely to require follow-up informant testing, for example by means of questionnaires, to check up conclusions based on corpus data. This still remains to be done for the present study.

3 Analysis

The definitions in the dictionary look-up for *real* in *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (1995: 1369–70) offer the following information (for economy of space, only some of the examples have been included):

1 Something that is **real** actually exists and is not imagined, invented, or theoretical. *Legends grew up around a great many figures, both real and fictitious.*

2 If something is **real** to someone, they experience it as though it really exists or happens, even though it does not. [*His*] *life becomes increasingly real to the reader.*

3 A material or object that is **real** is natural or functioning and not artificial or an imitation. ...*the smell of real leather...*

4 You can use **real** to describe someone or something that has all the characteristics or qualities that such a person or thing typically has. *He's not a real alcoholic.*

5 You can use **real** to describe something that is the true or original thing of its kind, in contrast to one that someone wants you to believe is true. *This was the real reason for her call...*

6 You can use **real** to describe something that is the most important or typical part of a thing. *When he talks, he only gives glimpses of his real self. The smart executive has people he can trust doing all the real work.*

7 You can use **real** when you are talking about a situation or feeling to emphasize that it exists and is important or serious. *Global warming is a real problem. There was never any real danger.*

8 You can use **real** to emphasize a quality that is genuine and sincere. *...real commitment...; ...real determination...*

9 You can use **real** before nouns to emphasize your description of something or someone; used in spoken English. *"It's a fabulous deal, a real bargain" ... You must think I'm a real idiot.*

3.1 *Categorial function and meaning*

As an adjective, *real* is linked to a noun, directly in its attributive function or indirectly as a predicative complement mediated by a copula (cf. Figure 1).

The attributive function is fulfilled inside the noun phrase, which may be introduced by determiners for definite or indefinite reference (1 and 2 in Fig. 1). A pattern of the form NP(def) + Copula + *real* NP(indef) will be of special interest in the later analysis (3 in Fig. 1).

The predicative function has no alternative constructions (B in Fig. 1). Its distribution is also more limited in that not all attributive constructions have a predicative counterpart (cf. "classifiers" below). We see that, while *These jewels are real* seems possible as an alternative to *These are real jewels*, **The owner is real* is hardly acceptable and *?My father is real* is at least doubtful.

Broadly speaking, adjectives may be used as two kinds of semantic operators, **classifiers** and **descriptors** (cf. Fig. 2). I am using here the terminology of *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (LGSWE 2000: 508).

A classifier selects a category of entities from a number of potential alternatives and assigns the referent of its headword to it. The classifier often operates in the context of a system of classification in which it may acquire highly specialized meanings which deviate from their prototypical ones. Most classifiers are restricted to the attributive function. Wine may be red, white or rosé, but white wine, for instance, is hardly white in the customary sense. That is why we get sentence pairs like *Let's have some white wine* versus *This wine is white*, which might be used in an unambiguous situation for *This is white wine* (cf. Fig. 2). The same goes for *black* and *white coffee*. *Real leather* is another case, as *Do*

you want real leather? is acceptable, while *This leather is real* may possibly be used in a sufficiently clear context to mean *This is real leather*.

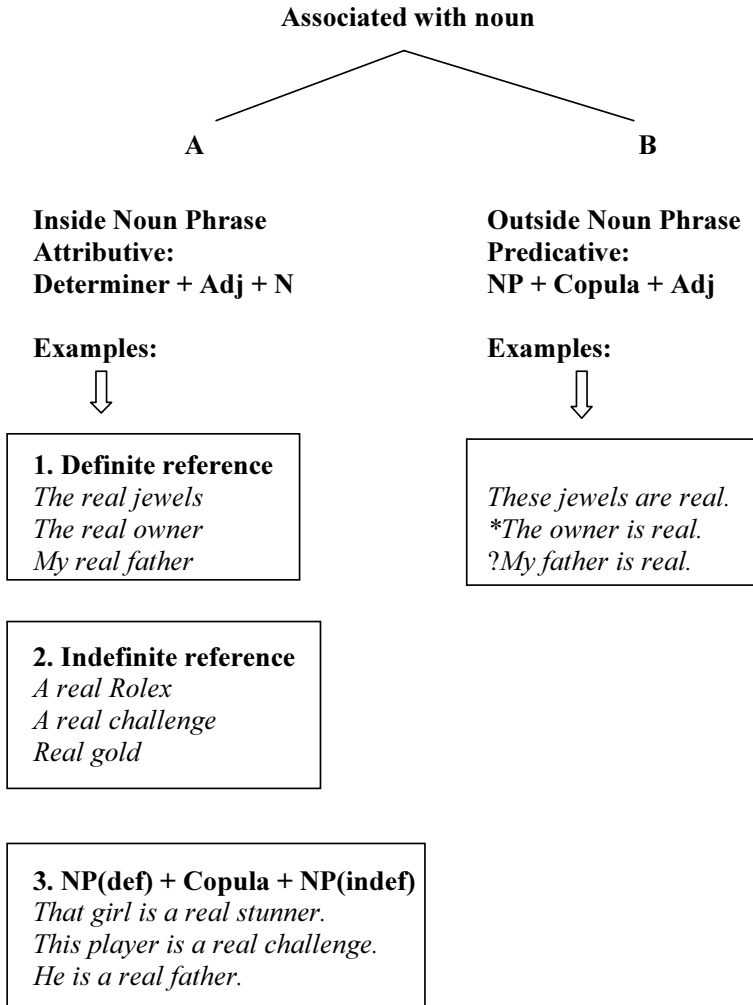


Figure 1: Adjectival functions

A descriptor ascribes a property to the referent of its headword. It is used both attributively and predicatively, and it is typically gradable; as in *I was carrying a heavy suitcase.* – *The suitcase was very heavy.* *My heavy/brown/big suitcase* is paralleled by *My suitcase is heavy/ brown/big.* The uses of *real* are not always easy to pinpoint. It may even be the case that it is used predominantly as a classifier. Corpus data will show to what extent it is gradable in its attributive function. When used predicatively it may be graded. There may be a difference between grading by means of *very* and by means of *so*. However, the meaning of *real* as a descriptor seems to be limited to that which is an antonym of “unreal”, “imagined”: *I dreamed I met a real prince.* – *The prince seemed so real.*

The classifier – descriptor dichotomy may be rendered as in Figure 2:

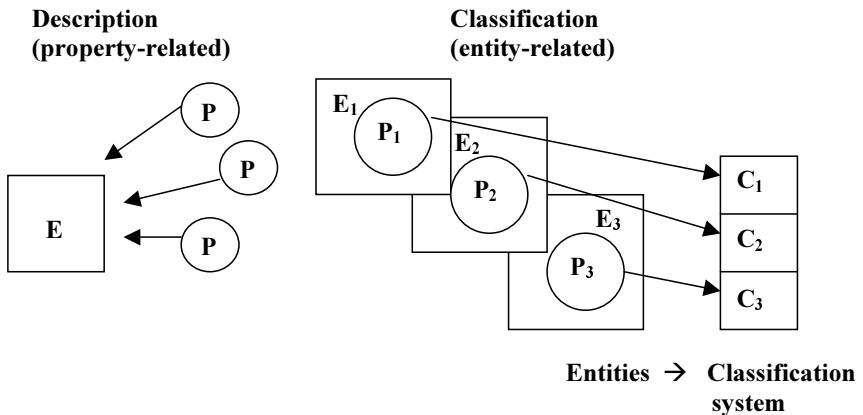
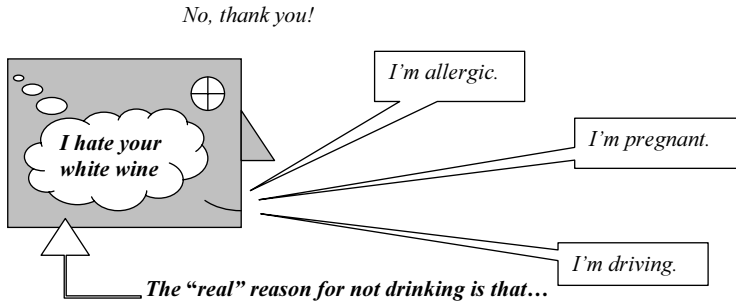


Figure 2: Description versus classification (**E** = entity, **P** = property, **C** = class)

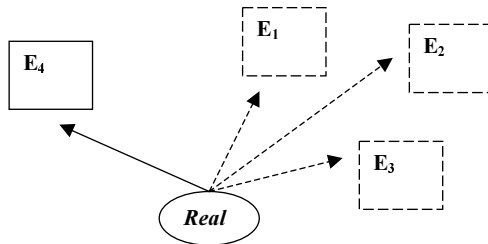
Example (1) illustrates the use of *real* as a classifier:

- (1) A: *Do you want a glass of wine?*
 B: *No, thank you.* - *I'm allergic.*
 - *I'm pregnant.*
 - *I'm driving.*

Let us assume that B is not, in fact, quite honest, and that none of the reasons given is *the real reason*. We will then have the “real-world speaker” illustrated in Figure 3:



Real selects an entity (e. g. thing, person)



There are explicit or implicit alternatives which are not “real”.

Figure 3: Real used as a classifier.

Now consider examples (2) and (3) from Hübler (1983), quoted in Vedin (2002):
19:

- (2) *Paul is not a father.*
- (3) *Paul is a catastrophe.*

If we insert *real* into these sentences, we will get the following alternatives (I have added (2c) for comparison):

- (2a) *Paul is not a real father.*
- (2b) *Paul is not the/my real father.*
- (2c) *?Paul is a father. → =Paul has children.*
- (2d) *Paul is a real father.*
- (3a) *Paul is a real catastrophe.*
- (3b) *Paul [not Jane] is the real catastrophe.*

In (2a), we are told that Paul may indeed have children, but he does not act as a proper father should. He does not, in other words, show all the characteristics of a “normal” father which are automatically assumed to accompany his biological fatherhood. He deviates from some norm.

In (2b), Paul may very well be both the biological father of someone and behave in the proper fatherly manner. He even acts as the father but, in fact the biological father is someone else. The distinction between (2a) and (2b) is derived from the shift between the indefinite and the definite reference.

Sentence (2) may have two meanings, one of which approaches the sentences with an added *real*. By saying *Paul is not a father* we may mean that he does not act properly, considering that his wife has just given birth to his daughter. One can sense the shadow of *real* between the lines.

The word *father* is a relational term, and as such it requires the explicit or implicit presence of the other term of the paternal relationship. This triggers the definite article or the possessive pronoun. If, on the other hand, the indefinite article is used, then the characteristics normally associated with a typical, idealized father come to the fore. This seems to apply only to the negated sentence, however, because intuitively (2c) is only open to the purely relational interpretation. To express the descriptive meaning, the sentence must contain *real*, as in (2d).

The relation between (3) and (3a) is the same as between (2) and (2a). (3) seems already to convey the idea of *real catastrophe*. (3b), finally, illustrates what happens with the shift from the indefinite to the definite reference. Implied in the context are various candidates for the role of “catastrophe”, and this statement settles the matter by pointing out the correct one.

Vedin (2002: 18–21) discusses how confirmation gives exact information about an event, while negation opens up implications of any number of events retrievable from the context. The *yes – no* polarity, combined with the dimension of definiteness, offers the key to the explanation of many of my examples, as illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1: Interdependence of reference and yes/no polarity

	Yes/No	
Reference	Confirmation + Definite	Negation + Definite
	Confirmation + Indefinite	Negation + Indefinite

Consider the following cases:

- (4) *This is the real reason.*
1. The search for a proper reason is limited by confirmation.
 2. The fact that there are also some alternatives which we discard is indicated by means of definite reference.
- (5) *This is not the real reason.*
1. Since this is not the proper one, the negation leaves us to search among an infinite number of alternatives. Context, however, reduces the number of reasonable candidates.
 2. Here too, we know that there is in fact a proper alternative, which we just have not found yet. Those already presented have been false. This is indicated by the definite reference. The word *real* itself contributes a connotation of suspicion.
- (6) *This is a real reason.*
1. The confirmation here excludes all other alternatives for what “this” might have been.
 2. The indefinite reference indicates that we know what a class of real reasons should look like. Anything we assign to it shares its defining properties.
- (7) *This is not a real reason.*
1. Since this is not a proper candidate, the negation leaves us with an unlimited number of alternatives for what the thing referred to actually is.
 2. The indefinite reference indicates that there does exist a class of real reasons with certain defining properties.

The syntactic pattern of examples (4) – (7), combined with the indefinite reference, is the typical formula used for classifications. An act of classification serves the purpose of assigning an individual entity to one of the categories of our conceptual universe. In everyday conversation, the question “*What is this?*” requires an answer like “*It is an X*”. This is structure number 3 in Figure 1 (a combination of a definite Noun Phrase and a Copula with an indefinite Noun Phrase). I will regard sentences like those as some kind of classification as they turn up in my corpus data.

3.2 *The corpus data*

Let us consider the data offered by the corpus. The material immediately lends itself to a number of quantitative observations:

- The word *real* occurs 23,180 times in the BNC.
- There are 3,372 instances of *real* in about 11 million words of the text, that is in 11 per cent of the corpus. When doing the collocational analysis, I limited myself to this portion of the corpus.
- The rank of the word *real* is 530 in a vocabulary of 86,700 words in the American Heritage Intermediate Corpus (Carroll, Davies and Richman 1971: 566). The size of this corpus is five million words of running text. *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* ranks it in the highest frequency band, which contains the 700 most common words in the corpus used for the dictionary (1995: xiii).
- There are about 250 instances of *real* used in an adverbial function in informal style, which I have excluded from my data (*real good, real hard, real heavy, real soft*).
- Attributive *real* in definite noun phrases totals 929 (*the/our real problem*).
- Attributive *real* in indefinite noun phrases totals 768 (*a real friend/no real challenges*).
- Predicative *real* totals 133 after BE.
- *For real* totals 23 (*...that they were smoking for real*).
- Prepositional phrases total 806.
- Indirect object NPs have not yet been counted.
- *Real* as predicative complement to the object has not yet been counted.
- Attributive *real* in the structure NP(def) + Copula + *real* NP(indef) occurs 118 times. This is a special case of attributive *real* in indefinite noun phrases.
- Graded *real* totals 79 and occurs in the following contexts: *very real* (50), *more real* (18), (*the*) *most real* (1), *so real* (6), *less real* (4). *Very* differs from *more, most, so* and *less* not only in terms of its frequency but also in that it is much more frequent in noun phrases than as a predicative adjective (NPdef 14, NPindef 27, Predicative 9), while none of the other adverbs turn up in noun phrases at all.
- Quotation marks are used in various ways to indicate a kind of hedging in 182 cases: “*real*” (as in *the “real” world*); “...*real*” (as in “*the real*” world); “*real*...” (as in *the “real world”*) and “...*real*...” (as in “*the real world*”). True quotations have been excluded from this figure.

In Table 2 only NPs as subjects, direct objects and predicative complements are included in addition to the cases of predicative *real* after the verb BE. The rest of the discussion will focus on these cases, which means that *real* as a predicative complement to the object, *real* in NPs as indirect objects and *real* in prepositional phrases will have to await further analysis.

Table 2: Frequencies of *real*

	Attributive: 1,402		Predicative: 133	
	NPdef	NPindef		
NP + Copula	251 (<i>the real</i> 169)	42 (<i>a/Plur/Unc</i> 42)		
NP + any other V	149	118		
<i>be</i> + NP	101	230		
any other V + NPdirobj	Concr 49	Concr 73		
	Abstr 123	Abstr 266		
Total	673	729	133	= 1,535

3.2.1 Collocations

Table 3 shows part of a frequency table extracted from the KWIC concordance results for *real* by means of *MonoConc Pro 2.0*. The complete frequency table includes all the collocates occurring with *real* five times or more but for reasons of space I have included the top fourteen lines only. As is obvious from the forms of BE in bold type, the table lists word forms and not lemmas. Other forms of the verb in 1st or 2nd position to the left of *real*, such as *am*, *are*, *were*, *been* are found at lower frequencies.

In Table 3 there are three “ghost words”, namely “bquo” for the beginning of a quote, “equo” for the end of a quote and “mdash” for the long dash. As is explained in the *User’s Reference Guide for the British National Corpus* (1998: 21), these are tagging conventions that treat certain punctuation marks as word forms. The long dash has been ignored in this study, but I touched briefly on the use of quotation marks in section 3.2 above.

Table 3: Collocate frequencies for *real*

2nd left	1st left	<i>real</i>	1st right	2nd right
122 <i>to</i>	549 <i>the</i>		80 <i>equo</i>	283 <i>of</i>
111 <i>of</i>	463 <i>a</i>		77 <i>world</i>	152 <i>an</i>
85 <i>is</i>	145 <i>bquo</i>		71 <i>life</i>	124 <i>equo</i>
80 <i>was</i>	123 <i>in</i>		68 <i>terms</i>	109 <i>in</i>
74 <i>the</i>	105 <i>The</i>		64 <i>and</i>	103 <i>is</i>
62 <i>'s</i>	101 <i>of</i>		52 <i>thing</i>	101 <i>to</i>
56 <i>in</i>	84 <i>no</i>		41 <i>problem</i>	72 <i>for</i>
48 <i>that</i>	82 <i>'s</i>		27 <i>interest</i>	54
48 <i>mdash</i>				
43 <i>a</i>	65 <i>any</i>		27 <i>people</i>	51 <i>I</i>
42 <i>be</i>	56 <i>for</i>		26 <i>or</i>	42 <i>the</i>
41 <i>as</i>	42 <i>with</i>		24 <i>reason</i>	41 <i>was</i>
40 <i>it</i>	40 <i>his</i>		24 <i>nice</i>	37 <i>but</i>
38 <i>with</i>	40 <i>was</i>		23 <i>good</i>	36 <i>The</i>

3.2.1.1 Attributive *real*

As regards noun heads (1st or 2nd right), some nouns in the singular occur an additional number of times in the plural at lower frequencies and vice versa. To the 41 instances of *problem*, for example, is added another 14 of *problems*.

What Table 3 shows is that *real* is often followed by the nouns (1st right) *world*, *life*, *terms*, *thing*, *problem*, *interest*, *people*, and *reason*. In fact, when a total survey of all nouns modified by attributive *real* has been made, we find 61 different nouns, which total a number of 907 occurrences. To these should be added the even larger number of nouns occurring less than five times.

A closer study of the nouns reveals that there are very few concrete nouns in comparison with the huge number of abstract ones. Stretching the criteria a little, we end up with only ten different words: *world* (77), *thing* (67), *people* (27), *person* (10), *friend* (7), *police* (7), *home* (8), *estate* (16), *property* (16), *essence* (15). The first three of these are, however, quite frequent. *Real leather*, on the other hand, turns up only once in 3,000 examples.

An analysis of the abstract nouns shows that they are largely associated with human goals and desires, intellectual and emotional experiences, thinking and calculating. In the following lists I have made an impressionistic division into rather vague semantic domains:

- Words related to problems: *problem, danger, challenge, test, risk, threat, concern, trouble, difficulty, effort.*
- Words related to possibility: *possibility, chance, success, talent, action, choice.*
- Words related to logical discrimination: *question, issue, point, significance, difference, distinction.*
- Words related to financial terminology: *interest, wages, value, incomes, economy, price, terms, business, work, job.*
- Words related to influence: *power, strength, control.*
- Words related to causal relationships: *reason, purpose, cause.*
- Words related to identification: *name, sense, story, presence.*
- Words related to processual development: *increase, change.*
- Words related to emotions: *feeling, concern, pleasure, pain, need, interest.*

The following corpus sentences illustrate the use of some of these words, most of which occur with definite reference:

- (8) *But stability is **the real problem**, not numbers*
- (9) ***The real obstacle** is the lack of political will.*
- (10) *But **the real difficulty** for France, as might be expected, is philosophical.*
- (11) *Those are **the real dangers** in our society today.*
- (12) *Others suspected the truth: that Hitler's public stance did represent **his real feelings** on the issue.*
- (13) *Ratification of the Maastricht deal is likely to prove **the first real test** of Mr Major's new Government.*
- (14) ***The real solution** is to train pilots to accept responsibility, whether they are sitting in the aircraft or are merely bystanders at the launch point.*
- (15) *...Mr Thomas, **whose real name** is David, comes from Grasmere, Cumbria, and is not Welsh at all.*
- (16) ***The real purpose** of the General Council was to explore the possibility of establishing effective cooperation between unions.*

When we have to interpret other people's behaviour and thinking or compare each other's assessments of states of affairs in the present or the future, it becomes relevant to talk about whether something is real or not. We try to find informed answers to questions like:

- Was that the best he could do?
- Do we know what dangers/difficulties/threats/obstacles/risks to focus on to achieve the best results of our actions?
- What are our best predictions as to problem solution/success/people's talents?
- What is our safest interpretation of people's behaviour as to their intentions and private feelings?
- Does a person try to conceal his/her name, thoughts, opinion or feelings?

That these semantic domains are so frequent with *real* may be explained in the following manner: people form different opinions of external affairs or they may not be honest to each other as to their own internal processes. Therefore, they try to see through appearances to check each other's statements against their own judgment. They want to find out somebody's *real reasons*, *real character*, *real intentions*, *real purposes* or *real name*. These collocations typically occur with definite reference, because, as I showed earlier, there is likely to exist one correct alternative only. *Real* is a classifier and *the real* alternative is identified, while all the spurious ones are eliminated. When *real* is used in noun phrases with indefinite reference, it seems to become a descriptor, as in sentences (17) to (22):

- (17) ...it was like seeing **a real dead body** lying there.
- (18) ...you view the world with shocked amazement, you need **a real woman** in your life.
- (19) **But real people** come in all shapes and sizes. [Cf. "Real leather shoes" ...]
- (20) We'll all help you but you must **make a real effort** too.
- (21) **But that puts them all in a real quandary.**
- (22) *If this suggestion was difficult to swallow, Mother Bombie's home made soup, which appeared at supper time, presented **a real problem.***

In (17) *real* conveys the sense of "not imagined", which is mainly associated with its use as a descriptor. The interpretation of (18) – (22) is also probably descriptive, but now in a metaphorical sense. The meaning of *real* may be para-

phrased “to be taken seriously, as if not imagined”. There is an emphatic feeling about most of these expressions. In this respect they are somewhat similar to the examples to be discussed in the next section.

NP(def) + Copula + *real* NP(indef)

The structure NP(def) + Copula + NP(indef) is the typical formula of classifications: “This thing is an X”. I suggested this analysis already when treating examples (6) *This is a real reason* and (7) *This is not a real reason*. Besides, when *real* is added to the complement NP, the structure becomes emphatic. Sentences (23) – (28) illustrate this emphasis quite clearly:

- (23) *This man was **a real cultural snob** who quite destroyed me.*
- (24) *The bloke that owned it before was soft, **a real loser**.*
- (25) *She was **a real nosey parker**.*
- (26) *That is **real freedom!** [Cf. *That is freedom.*]*
- (27) *A pro can identify the mock burglar alarm, but the genuine article is **a real deterrent**.*
- (28) *So this is **a real old English inn?***
- (29) *That's **a real professional**, a player who plays all surfaces: grass, clay, hard courts.*
- (30) *She's **a real old bat**, she is.*
- (31) *Well, he was **a real man**, a real general man, he drove fast cars and flew an aeroplane as well as being a fine musician.*
- (32) *Angie was very young and very wild in those days – **real mad-cap**.*
- (33) *His lady's a bit more fussy, but **a real lady** nonetheless.*
- (34) *He's **a real comedian**, this fellow*
- (35) *He was a hand-loom weaver then, **a real craftsman**.*
- (36) *...I am **a real hoarder**.*
- (37) *Everyone coughed most of the time, they couldn't tell the difference between coughing and breathing after a while, but his was **a real lung curdler** when it got going.*
- (38) *It can be **a real privilege** to meet an older person who has experienced considerable loss in their life and has come to terms with it.*

Additional corpus examples of the same kind are *a real bonus*, *a real no-hoper*, *real show-stoppers*, *a real old devil*, *a real baby*, *a real eye-opener*, *a real puzzle*. This structure occurs 118 times.

Now, if a strict classification is normally non-emphatic, what is then the difference between for example *That is freedom* and *That is real freedom!* (26)? Are there neutral classifications without *real* and emphatic ones with? I believe we may reconcile the two classifying formulas in the following manner: *That is freedom* expresses a truth-conditional type of classification and *That is real freedom* is consistent with a prototype analysis.

To be assigned a particular category in componential analysis, a term must be marked for a specific set of semantic features. If it fails in one respect, it is not identified with the category and has to belong to a different one.

In prototype theory, however, the prototype of a category is the best example of that category, but there are also less typical specimens, which lack one or more characteristics of the prototype, but which are nevertheless considered members of the same family. *A real bird* is a really birdy bird. In most people's opinion a crane is not the birdiest bird they might imagine. It is less prototypical, but it is still a kind of bird.

So, on this analysis, *That is real freedom!* (26) simply indicates that here is what is in somebody's opinion the very best example of freedom that may be imagined. There are many other less typical specimens, which are therefore more peripheral examples of their categories. The emphatic function is then quite easily explained, because the prototype of a category has also more characteristics belonging to the category than the less central specimens. This is a matter of degree or, in other words, emphasis.

A communicative aspect of the use of *real* as a classifier is that it gives the speaker a chance of signalling that his utterance is in fact metaphorical. The person or thing defined is in some cases not assigned to the literal category but to a metaphorical one, as in for instance (30). Here, it may be argued, is an area where classification and description meet. When categorizing something by means of metaphorical mapping on to another semantic domain, we may do so because we confer on it properties typical of another domain. Irrespective of whether we subscribe to a view of metaphor as motivated by similarity or as actually creating it (cf. Radman 1992, Barcelona 2000), we can establish the following scale:

- (39a) *Charlie is a comedian* (cf. (34))
- (39b) *Charlie is a real comedian.*
- (39c) *Charlie is a real comedian sometimes.*

The first sentence simply states what is Charlie's occupation. The second states (a) that he is a comedian "for real" (a professional as in the first case), (b) that he is an outstanding professional comedian or (c) that he is awfully funny at times but may very well be a dentist by profession. The third sentence unambiguously states only (c). (a) is a case of truth-conditional categorization, (b) is one of prototypical categorization, and (c) is a case of vivid description by means of metaphorical mapping on to the domain of the comedian and to the whole semantic frame that constitutes the context of a comedian.

As we have seen, the categorizing structure contains an indefinite noun phrase as a predicative complement. In this noun phrase the adjective *real* is attributive. Let us now consider structures in which *real* itself is a simple predicative complement.

3.2.1.2 Predicative *real*

When used as a predicative complement, *real* contrasts with "imagined", or "unreal", as in (40) – (49), "true" as in (50), "artificial" as in (51), or "pretended" as in (52) – (53). As is exemplified by (47) – (50), it can also be graded by means of *as...as*, *more...than* and *no less...than* constructions. In many examples this is not, however, proper grading but rather a comparison of one property with another, as in (46), (52) and (53). The contexts deal with for example fiction, film, dreamlike experiences and speculations:

- (40) *The road was real, was there, was not some lost myth in a witch-cursed forest.*
- (41) *...Aunt Louise became real: a motherly, rational, human being.*
- (42) *She could see a decision path dividing in front of her as plainly as if it was real.*
- (43) *Small wonder that his dreaming had seemed real to Charlie.*
- (44) *In this cloudy world, where so little seemed dependable or real, moral values were frequently suspended too.*
- (45) *To portray specific characters, whether imagined or real...*
- (46) *However I would suggest that the problem is more apparent than real.*
- (47) *...the cinematic illusion becomes as real or as powerful as any actual experience.*
- (48) *Subjective reality is treated as no less real than so-called objective reality, and what is thought, felt or imagined is recorded as if it were literally true.*

- (49) *This empty stage, this empty auditorium beyond, agape like a hollow mouth, had more potency for his mother than ever he and his dry father had; its unreality was **more real for her than their reality**.*
- (50) *It is larger than life, **more real than truth**, dramatic and daring, perceptive and flowing, and, significantly, full of paradox and ambiguity.*
- (51) *Inside this compound of fairytale castles and cartoon characters, it is difficult to distinguish **between what is artificial and what is real**.*
- (52) *So the sacrifice will be **more formal than real**, and it will be in the general interest, and it must be made.*
- (53) *It helped the decision, alas **more rhetorical than real**, to mount a direct attack on American poverty in the Sixties.*

As has become apparent from (40) – (53), the predicative use of *real* is associated with whether differences, colours, decisions, dreams, people, values, designs, psycho-physical laws, problems, fairy-tales, and sacrifices are just illusions of the mind or represent facts of our everyday world.

3.2.1.3 Coordination and grading

In the examples above we have already seen cases of *real* coordinated with other adjectives. One assumption when listing coordinated pairs is that the collocates are semantically related in terms of semantic contrast or similarity. The corpus data for *real* yielded the following cases:

Table 4: *Real* with contrasting and similar collocates

Contrasting terms			Similar terms	
1.	<i>apparent</i>	<i>real</i>	<i>dependable</i>	<i>real</i>
	<i>artificial</i>		<i>living</i>	
	<i>fake</i>		<i>physical</i>	
	<i>fantastic</i>		<i>solid</i>	
	<i>formal</i>		<i>true</i>	
	<i>hypothetical</i>			
	<i>imaginary</i>			
	<i>imagined</i>			
	<i>rhetorical</i>			
2.	<i>sentimental</i>		<i>the real</i>	
	<i>artifice</i>			
	<i>the artificial</i>			
3.	<i>fiction</i>	<i>real life</i>		
4.	<i>film stars</i>	<i>real people</i>		
	<i>limousine sharks and cordless telephone freaks</i>			

Some of the contrasting expressions in Table 4 are exemplified in sentences (54) – (60), while pairs of words expressing semantic similarity occur in (61) – (63).

- (54) ...its claim that **real furs** are more environmentally friendly than **fake furs** made from polluting synthetic fibres.
- (55) ...the relation between **real life and fiction**,
- (56) Tina turner is **fake soul, not real soul** at all.
- (57) When d'you meet any **real people** apart from **those limousine sharks and cordless telephone freaks** who never met **an ordinary person**, don't know **any ordinary people**: how they live, we live, nor how we die, I mean how they die.
- (58) ...some **real or hypothetical** Other.

- (59) *I have my idols, too, but they tend to be **real people, not film stars** or anything.*
- (60) *...we need **not the imaginatively true, but the physically real.***
- (61) *...**the real and solid world.***
- (62) *...**a real, living one.***
- (63) *I think **real, true artists** do have that instinct.*

It is obvious from (57) that *real people* are above all those that are “ordinary” in the opinion of the speaker of that utterance. From the speaker’s point of view, anybody who deviates negatively from the norm of ordinariness is, in other words “not real”. Sentence (60) is a telling example of how even what is true in imagination is not real enough compared to the physical world. In (63) the affinity between truth and reality is clear, as long as they are both applied to the concrete world.

3.3 Paradigmatic relations (lexico-semantic network)

The various collocates exemplified throughout the analysis of the corpus data in sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.1.3 may also offer information as to the paradigmatic relations of *real*, that is its position in some form of lexico-semantic network. Working out comprehensive lexical networks is, however, a formidable task, as is evident when studying such projects as for instance the Princeton *WordNet* (Fellbaum 1998) or *FrameNet* at Berkeley (Fillmore 2002). As stated at the beginning of this study, the elaboration of paradigmatic relations falls outside its present scope.

4 Tentative definition of real

Real is obviously a term related to “reality”. Reality, however, may be of two kinds, objective and subjective. Objective reality is a physical world of nature and creatures, whose existence and truth we are generally supposed to agree about. It serves as a norm for our assessment of natural causes and natural spontaneous physical action. Into this objective reality man has introduced the institutionalized functions of cultural and physical artifacts. Anything judged to be “real” is measured either against the physical world or against the defined functions of artifacts.

However, being creatures in the outer world and humans in the inner world, people also form subjective “realities” which they may find it very difficult to agree on. Thus, what some people consider an imaginary world may very well be somebody else’s real world, which even in some sense could supersede the

“realness” of objective reality. Besides, as suggested above, the comparison of an entity with the norm of objective or subjective reality may either be characterized by prototype effects or by truth conditions. A tentative definition of *real* might now be formulated in the following manner:

Real applied to an entity E indicates that E matches, completely or prototypically, the norm for such entities as regards the following phenomena:

1. In objective reality
(a) nature and creatures
or
(b) cultural and physical artifacts
or

2. In subjective reality
(c) judgment of objective reality
or
(d) intentions
or
(e) feelings

Figure 4: Tentative definition of real

5 The paradoxes of real

The meaning of the word *real* in some of its occurrences may at first glance be felt as paradoxical if it is only related to the world of physical perception. The definition suggested in Figure 4 takes care of such cases. Consider sentences (49), (59) and (60), in which phenomena which are not physical and do not belong to the concrete world are said to be “real”:

- (49) *This empty stage, this empty auditorium beyond, agape like a hollow mouth, had more potency for his mother than ever he and his dry father had; its unreality was **more real for her than their reality.***
- (64) ***Subjective reality** is treated as **no less real than so-called objective reality**, and what is thought, felt or imagined is recorded as if it were literally true.*
- (65) *The whiteness of **real nothingness.***

Sentence (64) is simply an example of 2a in Figure 4, and (49) and (65) exemplify 2c.

Now, a second apparent paradox is this: if what is natural is also real and what is not real is artificial, why, is not, for instance, a *natural harbour* a *real harbour*? Rather, it is the man-made, in other words the artificial, harbour that is a *real harbour* (cf. Magnusson forthcoming). In the light of 1b in Figure 4, this is no longer a real paradox, only an apparent one.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion we may return to the title of this paper: “What is the real thing?” Consider sentences (66) and (67):

- (66) *British and Australian substitutes for burgundy began to give place to **the real thing**.*
- (67) *I've seen them all: Rolexes, snide Rolexes that look better than the real thing.*

The answer is simply: “It is the genuine stuff”, and the “stuff” is retrieved from the context. Note that the noun phrase complements in sentences (61) and (62) have definite reference, which reveals the assumption that there is one and only one “thing” that is real. In a sentence like *This is a real thing*, the indefinite article would have implied that *thing* was used in its narrow sense of “the class of concrete countable objects”.

But apart from referring to a previously specified entity, the word *thing* may also have an almost universal meaning. So, an alternative answer to the question in the title could be: “It depends.” – It depends on what phenomenon you are talking about, what is your relation to it, and whether it is possible for there to be any non-real ones of a similar kind. *The real thing* may therefore designate anything that I personally value as the most important and emotionally genuine phenomenon in my life.

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