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## VALUES: STRETCHING AND EMBRACING THE UNEMBRACEABLE

### Abstract

In this paper, I attempt a linguistic analysis of how lexeme *values* is used in academic sources. Without criticising the extensive use of this notion, I address the gap between what *values* are supposed to mean and what they can mean in a broader scholarly discourse. I start by discussing the lexicographic understanding of *values* and proceed to analyse scholastic literature where the meaning of *values* may be stretched. Within this approach, I question if the effective use of *values* is feasible in the future due to the increasingly controversial nature of the term and try to motivate a discussion of terminological precision in academic sources.

Keywords: values, lexeme, sememe, seme, semantics, meaning, metaconcept

*Values* is a popular notion in contemporary humanities. Google book N-gram service shows that over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *values* was a widely-used lexeme with a peak in the 1980s and a slight decrease afterwards. A crude tool, the N-gram service reflects the academic interest in this notion. However, similarly to any widely utilised term, *values* seems to be stretched in meaning, consciously or unconsciously, to incorporate a variety of denotations and connotations.

This study sets off by analysing a lexicographic meaning of *values* to see what semes (fragments of the meaning) are typically embedded in this term by lexicographers. I then explore several scholarly sources to reveal the typical usage of *values* in academic discourse.

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## DATA AND METHOD

The research design of this study is simple. First, I analyse the lexicographic meanings of *values* by referring to dictionaries. Then, I select several academic sources and extract the contextual meanings of *values* from these sources. Afterwards, I compare the lexicographic meanings with the contextual meanings of *values*. Therefore, the material I needed was limited to a variety of dictionaries and academic sources.

This section of the paper explains the two time-honed methods I used – sememe and seme analyses. I also specify the selection criteria for the dictionaries and scholarly sources.

### METHODS

The two methods in this study rely on two terms, sememe and seme. The former is one of the meanings of a lexeme, while the latter is a component of the meaning (Sternin & Salomatina, 2011). Hence, one method entails the analysis of meanings, while the other addresses their constituent parts.

Sememe is typically analysed based on Academician Vinogradov's classification of sememes into direct nominative, derived nominative, and phraseologically bound (Vinogradov, 1977). The former two are denotational, that is, directly related to the object this lexeme names. The latter is connotational, as it is related to real-world objects indirectly with the aid of imagery.

Seme analysis describes meaning through several semes, features of the signified object that help differentiate lexemes. Often, seme analysis is dictionary-based. Nevertheless, lexicographers do not rely on seme analysis, and seme analysis may, thus, be imprecise. Semes can also be derived from contexts and experimentally (Levitsky & Sternin, 1989).

### DATA COLLECTION: DICTIONARIES

To perform the sememe and seme analyses, I selected several dictionaries representing full-size, collegiate, and learner types of dictionaries. The first category, full-size dictionaries, aims at providing native speakers with complete entries covering the meanings most extensively used in contemporary discourses. The second category, collegiate dictionaries, has fewer and shorter entries and addresses college students. These dictionaries tend to be updated faster due to smaller sizes and the demands of the

audience. The last category, learner dictionaries, is intended for learners. Therefore, such dictionaries are shorter and more straightforward in terms of vocabulary but supplied with additional examples and collocations.

Thus, the selection of dictionaries covers major lexicographic approaches. Specifically, I have used five full-size dictionaries, two collegiate dictionaries, and four learner dictionaries. The selection criteria were based on the reputation of the sources among lexicographers and the availability of the sources. The former factor is subjective, while the latter is a delimitation imposed by the researcher. However, the broader span of 11 dictionaries selected for the study partially overcomes the given subjectivity and delimitation. The complete list of the dictionaries is provided in Appendix 1.

Analysing the dictionary definitions of *values* implied several steps. First, I used the sememe analysis to determine the sememe type I needed to use in the study. Since *value* is associated with something of worth, all such meanings are direct nominative. The sememe of *values* needed for the study reflects the mode of behaviour or principle that is socially acceptable. Since such behaviour is also worthy, the sememe can be categorised as indirect nominative. Besides, lexeme *value* in this indirect nominative meaning is typically used in the plural form. Thus, I expected that I could rely on the formal criteria along with the type of meaning. Second, I analysed the 11 dictionaries selected for this study and derived the indirect nominative meanings of *values*, relying on the lexeme's form. Third, I analysed the semes that comprise the indirect nominative meanings from the dictionaries. Finally, I listed the most frequent semes derived from the dictionaries.

#### DATA COLLECTION: ACADEMIC SOURCES

The academic sources for this study were selected to correspond to several criteria: 1. Topic, 2. Credibility, and 3. Randomness. The first criterion means that the academic sources should correlate at least some way with the notion of *values* in its indirect nominative meaning. Typically, these sources explore *values* as one of the central notions in the analysis. Second, the sources were selected among the publications considered reliable in the academic environment. Finally, sources were to be selected according to a procedure that could be deemed random. Thus, combining these three parameters helped arrive at the list of academic sources in Appendix 2.

The following describes the procedure to select the academic sources and analyse the appropriate contexts where *values* were referred to. The description is given as a succession of steps.

First, I addressed the issue of the credibility of the sources selected for the analysis. Since the nature of the analysis required larger contexts, I picked monograph as the genre suitable for the task. However, unlike articles in venues, books are not always adequately rated in databases. Therefore, my solution was to pick books released by the top academic publishers:

- 1. Cambridge University Press;
- 2. Oxford University Press;
- 3. Palgrave Macmillan;
- 4. Princeton University Press;
- 5. Routledge.

The publication dates are within the last two decades, except for one source that dates back to 1977. The number of books from each publisher was three; thus, the total number of sources equals 15.

Second, from the sources I deemed credible, I selected books that correlate with *values* in the indirect nominative meaning. To establish such sources, I analysed titles and abstracts available for each academic source. For the successful third stage, I picked 45 sources, where every nine sources belonged to a publisher listed above.

Table 1. Stratified systematic sampling: interval k=3, integer=1

Cambridge University Press	Oxford University Press	Palgrave Macmillan	Princeton University Press	Routledge
1	10	19	28	37
2	11	20	29	38
3	12	21	30	39
4	13	22	31	40
5	14	23	32	41
6	15	24	33	42
7	16	25	34	43
8	17	26	35	44
9	18	27	36	45

Third, I established a procedure for stratified systematic sampling with an interval of three. I randomly assigned an ordinal number to each source I found, where sources 1–9 were published by Cambridge University Press, 10–18 by Oxford University Press, 19–27 by Palgrave Macmillan, 28–36 by Princeton University Press, and 37–45 by Routledge. I then picked every third source starting from an integer equal to 1 and arrived at the final list of sources for the analysis.

## RESULTS

This section describes the outcomes of the analysis outlined in the previous section. I first report what I have discovered in dictionaries. Then, I present the analysis of academic sources.

### WHAT DICTIONARIES SAY ABOUT VALUES

The sememes selected for this analysis were indirect nominative; hence, most of them were 4<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> meanings in the list provided by dictionaries. In addition, in all the dictionaries, the lexeme showed a formal feature of plurality. The semes, thus, were extracted only from such sememes.

Many dictionaries, as expected, repeatedly referred to the same or similar semes. After extracting such semes, I ordered them according to frequency and categorised them by the types of dictionaries where these semes were found. The results are shown in Table 2.

In total, the only seme that persists in all three types of dictionaries is *principle*, which appeared 10 times in the sememes of *values*. Other frequently used semes are *standard* (five times), *important* and *desirable* (four times each), *behaviour* and *right* (as opposed to *wrong*) – three times each, and *quality* and *moral* (two times each). Thus, I conclude that most semes can be categorised as prescriptive because they suggest that *values* prescribe a particular principle, standard, behaviour, and morality. All of these semes are essential and desirable.

One more component of meaning is worthy of attention. Dictionaries differ in attributing *values* to a personal or one of the societal strata. Full-sized dictionaries typically avoid any such reference, with only one dictionary attributing *values* to the domain of personal. One of the college dictionaries referred to *values* as a concept that works at all levels – personal,

Table 2. Semes extracted from lexeme *values* in three types of dictionaries

Full-Size Dictionaries	# of times used	College Dictionaries	# of times used	Learner's Dictionaries	# of times used
Principle	5	Principle	2	Principle	3
Standard	4	Goal	1	Belief	3
Desirable	3	Standard	1	Right	2
Behaviour	2	Quality	1	Wrong	2
Important	2	Desirable	1	Important	2
Moral	1			Moral	1
Quality	1			Behaviour	1
Right	1				
Worthwhile	1				
Judgement	1				

Source: Author's own work.

class, and society. Learner dictionaries categorise *values* as belonging to a group or community in three cases and a person in one. Thus, dictionaries avoid referring *values* to any social stratum. If they do, however, *values* belong to small groups (group, class, community – four times) or persons (three times).

#### HOW SCHOLARS DISCUSS VALUES

The semes of *values* were collected from the academic sources listed in Appendix 2. From each source, I selected 10 contexts resulting in 150 contexts analysed for this study. After the analysis, I arrived at a list of semes extracted from the contexts and categorised them by frequency and categories (Table 3).

One more classification option was attributing semes to one of the strata: society, group, or personality. It turned out that the sources consider *values* predominantly personal – 24 semes (e.g., preference, personal, or identity). *Values* as a representation of group (e.g., community, institutional, or organisational) identity was referred to in 10 semes and as a social feature in 11 contexts. In four more cases, semes such as *shared* and

Table 3. Semes in academic sources

Seme category	Semes	Frequency
Prescriptive (54)	Norms	15
	Moral	15
	Ethics	12
	Behaviour	7
	Principles	5
Universal (28)	Equality	7
	Truth	3
	Fairness	4
	Honesty	2
	Health	2
	Universal	1
	Empathy	1
	Harmony	1
	Care	1
	Trustworthiness	1
	Right and wrong	1
	Reciprocity	1
	Life experiences	1
	Character	1
	Entertainment	1
Belonging to a social sphere (21)	Religion	6
	Ideology	4
	Culture	4
	Political	2
	Policy	2
	Education	2
	Economy	1
Conflict-generating (12)	Questionable	4
	Problematic	3
	Clash	3
	Difference	2
Descriptive (9)	Interest	4
	Belief	3
	View	1
	Assumption	1
Democratic (6)	Liberal	3
	Freedom	2
	Democracy	1

Source: Author's own work.

*integration* suggested belonging to an entity of people without any reference to a specific group. Unexpectedly, three contexts showed that *values* do not need to be attributed to a person or society – they can be quite independent and objective.

Moreover, several academic sources referred to *values* in the national, regional, gender, and religious dimensions. To illustrate, D'Andrade (2008) lists several character qualities, such as pragmatism, novelty, or individualism. Moreover, in the US Northeast, they consider hard work and thrift values, while Southeast Americans emphasise Protestant morality.

#### LEXICOGRAPHIC AND ACADEMIC SOURCES COMPARED

When comparing what dictionaries say about *values* to academic texts, one should observe a single obvious similarity and several differences. The former rests in the prescriptive character of the semes embedded in *values*. Thus, 24 of 41 semes in lexicographic sources are prescriptive (e.g., principle, standard, behaviour, moral, etc.). Similarly, 54 of 175 semes in academic sources are prescriptive. This proximity means that at least a third of all *values* semes in academic contexts are per dictionary.

However, in total, scholars attribute more semes to *values* compared to lexicographers, and this fact constitutes the first significant difference. For instance, *values* tend to be correlated with various spheres of life, such as politics, economy, or religion. Moreover, some political regimes are more closely associated with values: democracy-related semes are embedded in some contexts where *values* emerge.

Another significant difference consists in the existing opposition between the positive and negative semes in *values*. Specifically, some academic sources point at the negative effect of the *values* implying semes such as *clashing* and *difference* as inherent components of *values*, and *values*, thus, can disconnect rather than unite. Such negative semes tend to be avoided in dictionaries.

Additionally, academic sources in many contexts reduce *values* to concrete virtues, such as honesty, fairness, or life experience. In such contexts, *values* are more specific: they lose their wholistic value as an abstract reference to something positive.

Finally, unlike the dictionaries, which attribute *values* to small groups or individuals, academic sources suggest that *values* are predominantly a personal issue. In fewer cases, group and societal.



## DISCUSSION

The results of the study can be effectively summarised in Table 4. This table compares how dictionaries and academic sources treat *values* in terms of its meaning.

Table 4. Semes of *values* in dictionaries and academic sources

Category	Dictionaries	Academic Sources
Most typical category of semes	Prescriptive	Prescriptive
Other categories of semes	Descriptive	Universal Belonging to a social sphere Conflict-generating Descriptive Democratic
Abstract vs. Specific	Abstract: <i>values</i> are the generalised good	Abstract and Specific: <i>values</i> are the good but also specific character traits
Connotation	Positive	Positive and Negative
Individual vs. Group vs. Society	Individual and Group	Predominantly Individual

Source: Author's own work.

Academic sources tend to embed more semes in *values* compared to dictionaries (Table 4). Moreover, such semes can contravene or specify the dictionary understanding of *values*. *Values* are generally used to suit the purposes of the researcher. The conclusion to be drawn is that the meaning of values may be contextually stretched.

Stretching the meaning, in general, results from and leads to broader use of a lexeme. However, a more commonplace use leads to vague meaning that tends to incorporate increasingly more semes. This phenomenon is known and widely studied in linguistics (Arutyunova, 1988; Blokh, 2000; Sinelnikova, 2009; Saduov, 2010), and several terms exist to name lexemes with a wider range of meanings, including amoeba word, semantically broad lexemes, phantom words, and simulacrum words.

Thus, in the long run, *values* can be nullified as a credible notion. Using *values* may become increasingly difficult for scholars due to its vague

meaning and comparatively easy for those outside the academic discourse. Specifically, a vague meaning of *values* can make it overly popular in other social spheres, such as politics, because semantically broad meaning can incorporate any senses at the pleasure of its user.

A solution to this problem would be using specific terms in place of *values* whenever possible. An example below demonstrates that in a handful of cases, *values* is nothing but a metaconcept (a concept about a concept) that could be easily avoided.

The widespread reliance on the *Homo economicus* model cannot be said to have definitely caused the serious problems of observed managerial malfeasance, but it may well have, and, in any case, it surely does not act as a healthy influence on managerial morality. Students have learned this flawed model, and in their capacity as corporate managers they doubtless act daily in conformance with it. This, in turn, may have contributed to the weakening of socially functional values and norms, including honesty, integrity, self-restraint, reciprocity, and fairness, to the detriment of the health of the enterprise (Zak, 2008).

In this example, the author refers to an economic model that corrupts the existing management and college students who will become managers in the future. As a consequence of such a negative influence, company employees become less honest and fair. Though the writer refers to the detrimental effects of an economic model, he introduces a metaconcept – *values*. In fact, he offers two metaconcepts, values and norms, where these notions are contextual synonyms. He then reduces the meaning of these concepts to smaller constituents, such as honesty. Clearly, the abstract does not require metaconcepts and can convey the same meaning without them. One possible way to paraphrase the last sentence in the example could be this: “This, in turn, may have reduced honesty, integrity, self-restraint, reciprocity, and fairness, to the detriment of the health of the enterprise.” Most probably, the paraphrase does not diminish the author’s intent – also because *values* were only an insignificant part of the author’s main idea of the paragraph.

Thus, I hypothesise that in many academic contexts, the use of *values* could be quantitatively reduced. Additionally, academic writers could increase the quality of such usage by checking if the use of *values* is needed in a particular context and what this lexeme means.

Reducing the use of *values* along with more careful attitude to its contextualisation could help prevent the uncontrolled semantic bloating of

this lexeme. Moreover, this practice could improve the quality of writing. In general, using metaconcepts is less welcomed in academic writing (Pinker, 2014). Concrete language tends to increase readability.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

While the study seems robust in its methodological approach and arrives at results of certain credibility, it is not immune to limitations. Some of these limitations may suggest directions for future work. First, the analysed data were in English and produced by native speakers of English. Apparently, *values* in other languages or used by non-native speakers from non-English-speaking linguacultural communities could show different results.

A second limitation is the researcher's restricted access to sources. Specifically, I had a modest selection of dictionaries and academic sources. Therefore, I had to reduce the numbers to 11 dictionaries and 45 sources from which I could choose the material.

Finally, the credibility of the academic sources may be questionable since the fact of publication with a major publisher does not necessarily guarantee high quality. Expanding the study to journal articles would benefit the study since tracking journal credibility is easier.

Thus, the three limitations of this study suggest possible future work to make the study's outcomes more accurate. However, I could hypothesise that analysing more sources cannot substantially change the major conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant outcome of this study is the recommendation to avoid using the lexeme *values* whenever possible. This recommendation will help prevent semantic widening of the lexeme and improve clarity: concrete language that avoids metaconcepts is more readable. Moreover, this advice can be extended to other abstract notions that may be overused and stretched in their meanings. Overall, avoiding unnecessary use of concepts can help reduce the complexity of academic language and save much effort for the writers and readers of academic texts.

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## Full-Size Dictionaries:

The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language

The Chambers Dictionary

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Random House Webster's Dictionary of American English

New Oxford American Dictionary

## College Dictionaries:

Webster's New World College Dictionary

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

## Learner Dictionaries:

Cambridge Dictionary

COBUILD Advanced Learner's Dictionary

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

Macmillan English Dictionary For Advanced Learners of American English