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Lexical Conflation
- fat (Stvan 2007)
- sugar (Stvan 2007)
- health literacy (Stvan 2008)
- stress (Stvan 2010)
- cold (Stvan 2011)
- salt (Stvan 2012)

Conflation in eight pairs of polysemous terms in contemporary American English: cold, cholesterol, fat, hot, oil, stress, sugar, sweet

Starting Point
All show a kind naming effect.

Conflation = tightening of meaning overlap in polysemous terms.

Do the terms conveying causes for health outcomes show the same type of sense relations?

Goal: examine the types of connections between related word meanings in these discussions, in particular cases that talk about cause and effect in health discourses.

Outline of the Talk
- Previous research
- Data collection
- Polysemous pairs sorted by part of speech; then by type of meaning relation
- Conclusions about how these fit together

Some Relevant Literature
- **Metonymy**
  - Lakoff & Johnson (1980)
  - Bredin (1984)
  - Warren (1999)
- **Polysemy**
  - Kövecses and Radden (1998)
  - Chelliah (2004)
  - Stvan (2007)

Metonymy Examples
a) I [the place I am at] am bugged
   - I (explicit/trigger) = the speaker
   - I (implied/target) = the speaker’s location

b) I like [the music of] Mozart
   - Mozart (explicit/trigger) = the composer
   - Mozart (implicit/target) = the composer’s music
   (Warren 1999)
We are concerned primarily with how people understand their experiences. We view language as providing data that can lead to general principles of understanding (L & J 1980: 116).

- One route to empirically investigating word use: corpus data

For instances of lay people using these words, searches in two types of corpora provide a more comprehensive dataset.

**Data Sources**

Coca
(_corpus of contemporary American English)

- Components from Spoken (TV Transcripts), Fiction, Magazine, and Newspapers
- Total number of words = 400 million

[http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/](http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/)

Cadoh
_corpus of American discourses on health_

- Components from Personal Blogs, Commercial Blogs (including follow-up comments), Listservs and Online forums and Wikis, Letters to the Editor, TV Transcripts, and Radio Transcripts
- Total number of words = 290,718

[http://ling.uta.edu/~laurel/CADOH/CADOH-description.html](http://ling.uta.edu/~laurel/CADOH/CADOH-description.html)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Cause Sense</th>
<th>Effect Sense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cold</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cholesterol</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sugar</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>noun</td>
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<tr>
<td>stress</td>
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<td>noun</td>
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<tr>
<td>fat</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>adjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>hot</td>
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<td>adjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>sweet</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>adjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oily</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>adjective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to be [sensation] cold → catch a [viral] cold

“You know, you don’t get a cold by going out in the cold weather after a shower despite what my mother told me.” (TV, CBS Sunday Morning, 2002)
Eating sweet foods $\rightarrow$ becoming a sweet person

Eating hot (spicy) food $\rightarrow$ having a hot (spicy/angry) personality

Eating fat-filled foods leads to becoming fat-filled person

"How can you be so sweet?!?!? My mom always said that eating too much candy makes you sweet... but I eat a lot of that and I am not super sweet."  
(Blog, Bethany, Giving Reading a Chance, 2008)

"They are restless, angry, hot tempered and critical. Hot spicy foods seem to engender those with anger, irritability or even rages."  
(Webpage, Card, Anger Management, 2010)

"When you eat ice cream, the fat in the ice cream becomes fat in your body. So if you eat a lot of ice cream, you might become fat. If you don’t, you’re gonna stay skinny."  
(Movie, Arndt, Little Miss Sunshine, 2006)

But not totally productive:

* salty [food] $\rightarrow$ salty [behavior]

* cold/icy food $\rightarrow$ cold/icy attitude, etc.

Eating oily foods $\rightarrow$ oily skin

"Eating greasy, oily foods will eventually produce oily skin. It is the diet’s fat (and sugar which is converted to fat) content that ends up on the surface of your skin and that is a relatively easy cause to fix."  
(Webpage, Siegenthaler, Oily Skin, 2008)

"Eating too much sugar causes our blood sugars to go haywire."  
(Webpage, Sibal, beautyden.com, 2011)

"For one thing, how much cholesterol you eat doesn’t necessarily determine how much [cholesterol] ends up in your blood. The body, it turns out, also manufactures its own cholesterol."  
(Magazine, Lemonick, Time, 2003)

"Sometimes workouts are not as effective at reducing stress because we use the time to think about all the stressful things we have going on."  
(Magazine, Reader’s Digest, 2010)
Sorting by Relation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Cause Sense</th>
<th>Effect Sense</th>
<th>Relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 cold</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>Symptom transfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 cholesterol</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>Unrecognized clinical term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 sugar</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>Unrecognized clinical term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 stress</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>Unrecognized clinical term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 fit</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>Value transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 hot</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>Value transfer</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 sweet</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>Value transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 oily</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>Iconic transfer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

- All occur in discussions of health
- All show up in discussions of the "eating or experiencing Sense-1, will result in the occurrence of Sense-2."
- But, the relationship between the two senses is not a singular one. There are several paths to creating sense-2 as an outcome, i.e.
  There is a lack of isomorphism between conflation / causality / trope type

References

Stvan, Laurel Smith. 2011. "You'll Catch Your Death of Cold": The Influence of Lexical Conflation on Beliefs about Causation.” Presented at the International Society for the Linguistics of English (ISLE) at Boston University June 20, 2011.
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