

THERE ARE NO MEANINGLESS SENTENCES

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It is an evening in the bar of the Hyatt-Regency where several congresses are held simultaneously. The linguist L. from MIT finds herself on the stool next to M., a man with a white beard and intensive brown eyes.

M: What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?

L: I'm here for a conference on GB, that is a theory of grammar.

M: That's gibberish to me.

L: And you?

M: I am training the colorless green ideas to sleep furiously.

L: ?

M: Yeah, that's what I'm doing.

L: I don't understand.

M: You know, I am actually one of the founders of a new environmentalist party that is having its convention here this week. One of the fundamental principles of the party is that each member is in charge of a particular idea concerning the environment. The person who is assigned a particular green idea is responsible for bringing it up under all relevant circumstances – in debates, demonstrations and so on. It is like in Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. We even call people by the idea they are

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associated with, so there is for example the ‘no whale fishing’ girl, and the ‘watch the ozone holes’ man.

L: OK. I understand now that there are some ‘green ideas’ around this hotel. But the rest sounds like gibberish to me.

M: Not at all. You know, one of the problems of the party is that most of the members are really dynamic and colorful, but some are too bleak to serve their idea. So we have set up a special training program for the colorless green ideas.

L: Which is ... ?

M: You know, I have been a teacher in meditation for many years before joining the party. I am working with a special type called transformational meditation, since it aims at transforming your relation to the world. One of the first steps in the training is to build up an emotion and then maintain it in any stage of consciousness, even in sleep. So today we have been practicing on rage, since being furious is really a core state in our political movement. I think that my lessons have been quite successful. Do you want to see the room where the colorless green ideas sleep furiously?

L: No, thank you.

M: That’s a pity. Well, I’d better go check the group to make sure they are still furious when they wake up. Nice talking to you.

M. leaves the bar but is soon replaced by C., a cognitive linguist from the West coast. L. tells about her encounter with M.

C: That’s not bad. As I’ve always said, any sentence can make sense in the right context.

L: You have the same accent as M. But, I thought the question whether a sentence is meaningful or not is a matter of whether the words combine in the right way to say something about the world. Semantics is not a matter of context.

C: But the meanings of words can change by all kinds of transformations. Have you ever heard of metaphors and metonymies for instance? And some of the transformations are given by context.

L: I never heard of semantic transformations.

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- C: Let's see. Saying that an idea is green is a rather conventional metonymy, where the color of the emblem of a political party is taken to represent its doctrines. Then letting the green ideas stand for people is another metonymy (pars pro toto) which works because of the way this party is set up. Saying that a person is colorless is a pretty worn out metaphor that everybody understands. That people sleep is a perfectly natural combination of meanings that requires no transformation. Sleeping furiously, finally, is a metaphor that depends on the peculiar theory behind transformational meditation. But I have seen more strained metaphors in other theories. Summing up, by two metonymies (one conventional and one pars pro toto) and two metaphors (one conventional and one 'theoretical'), one can make sense of "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously". It is a bit heavy to take all four steps at once. But context can introduce them one by one, and that makes perfect sense.
- L: I think I need another drink.