QUESTIONS OF TASTE:
THE PHILOSOPHY OF WINE

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CAN WINES BE BRAWNY?:
REFLECTIONS ON WINE
VOCABULARY

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Wine descriptions have been the topic of interest, investigation, and humour. Concerning the last, many people are familiar with James Thurber's cartoon of a group of people drinking wine, in which the host tells his guests, "It's just a naive domestic Burgundy without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption." Such an attitude has led some to wonder whether wine descriptions, at least those that employ metaphorical language, really have any meaning at all.

The linguistic theory that lies behind the descriptive part of the vocabulary has two parts which are closely related: (1) the intra-linguistic component, which is how words (and other linguistic terms) are related to each other and (2) the application (reference, denotation) which is how linguistic terms connect to the world. Both parts are necessary for a semantic theory. And although the two are closely connected, neither can be completely reduced to the other. The intra-linguistic component I use is the theory of semantic fields, developed by Trier (1931) and Lyons (1977). An important part of the field theory is a set of lexical relationships. The ones most important for wine vocabulary are synonymy, antonymy, class inclusion (hyponymy), and various other types of association.

BASIC WINE WORDS
Basic wine words are those that can be directly applied to properties of the wine and include words for colour and appearance (which I will not

discuss), bouquet and aroma, taste and mouthfeel. In addition, there are words for the way in which these properties combine, for example, balance. Finally there are a large number of evaluative terms, some of which are not confined to wine descriptions. However, much of the wine vocabulary is value laden. A *light wine* is neutral or good, but a *thin wine* is bad, and a *watery wine* is even worse. In my experience and experiments, wine drinkers who like a wine will never use *thin* or *watery*, but those who dislike it might.

The pure taste words are quite simple and limited: *sweet, sour* and *bitter. Salty* is rarely used. Subtypes of *sour* include *tart, acidic, acetic,* and possibly *tangy,* which may also involve a feel as well. Related to *sweet* is its antonym *dry* and several hyponyms of *sweet: cloying* and *sugary.* As is obvious, *sour, bitter, acidic, acetic, cloying* and *sugary* are negative in evaluation, while the others are neutral or positive, depending on the norms for any particular wine and the drinker's personal preferences.

There are relatively few pure smell words, among them *scented* and *fragrant.* Almost all the other aroma words are based on a substance: blackberry, asparagus, tar, coffee, chocolate, etc. Since taste and smell are so intimately connected, the term *flavour* can be used to cover both. These flavour words are straightforward, however, and Ann Noble has listed and categorised them in her wine aroma wheel (Noble, 1987, 1990). Many have positive or negative connotations, also relevant to wine type and personal taste.

The most interesting words for a linguist are those relating to mouthfeel, which involves two general classes of words: 1) *body,* characterised most generally by the antonymous pair *full-bodied* and *light,* and 2) other tactile sensations like *hard* or *prickly.* The physical correlates of *body* are the dissolved solids and the alcoholic content of the wine. This aspect of wine description uses metaphors from the semantic field of size, shape, and weight. *Full-bodied* wines can be *heavy, big, fat, flabby, thick, solid* and *deep.* These words, in turn, have associations and yield terms such as *strong, sturdy, solid, powerful, forceful, beefy* and *robust.* On the *light* side we find *small, little, thin, weak* (all negative) *delicate,* and *fragile. Flat,* another dimension word, has two technical meanings: 1) the wine lacks sufficient acid and (2) a sparkling wine has lost its bubbles.

The antonymous pairs *smooth/soft* and *rough/hard* serve as general words for other tactile (mouthfeel) sensations. Pleasant-to-touch sub-

stances are used for smooth wines, such as *velvety* and *silky,* plus other positive associations like *soft, gentle* and *tender.* In the *rough/hard* category, in addition to *hard* and *rough,* we find *sharp, harsh, firm* and terms relating to astringency, such as *astringent, tannic* and *puckery.* Other than *firm,* these terms are negative.

The acids in a wine can produce a tactile sensation, and there are several positive words to describe this feeling, including *prickly, lively, zestful,* and *crisp. Acidic* can be placed in this category as well as in the taste category.

We have seen that some standard wine descriptors like *big, hard* and *smooth* can be understood by their conventional associations to descriptors that relate directly to perception and sensation. These associations allow people to understand more distantly related terms like *masculine* and *feminine.* Masculine wines are heavy, big, strong, and maybe harsh, while feminine wines are soft, light, perfumed, elegant and delicate.

Many wine words concern *age. Young* and *old* are not just wine descriptors, of course. Although any wine a few months old is young, and any wine made a century ago is old, generally these and related words are used in a context relevant to the type of wine and the norms for when a particular wine should be drunk. Many of the age words depend on natural growth, development and change, such as *green, unripe, ripe, mature* and *immature.* In addition, descriptors based on the human life cycle can also be used, especially for wines that are too old, as in *decrepit, senile, dying* and *dead.* However, wine drinkers judge age, not by how many years ago a wine was made or bottled, but by how it tastes, and this is an inference based on smoothness or roughness, ripeness, acid, and other properties that develop as the wine changes.

Other common wine terminology is closely connected with evaluation, for example, balance and complexity. *Balance* refers to the proportion of various components in a wine: sugar, acid, tannin, etc. Positive descriptors include *balanced, harmonious* and *round. Unbalanced* and *unharmonious* are negative, along with terms that specify particular faults (*flat, cloying, sour*). *Complexity* refers to a wine's various components and flavours. Complex wines, that is, those with several flavours that interact and emerge during the drinking process are highly valued; *simple* wines are not bad, but they are uninteresting to wine gourmets.

SOME NEW (AND OUTRAGEOUS) METAPHORS

The semantic field of personality terms has been imported into wine descriptions. Words I found in wine literature of the 1970s include *personality* and *character*, and more specific descriptors like *serious, disciplined, austere, severe, forward* and *assertive*. Some of the newer ones are *shy, sly, reserved, reticent, generous, mean, polite, bold, in-your-face, loud, brash, sassy, ostentatious* and *flamboyant*. Many of these personality terms can be grouped into two antonymous sets, which we can label as *generous* and *forward* vs. *polite* and *shy*. *Generous, forward* wines "give out their flavors freely" (Stevenson, 1997:575); *brash, ostentatious* and *in-your-face* are more extreme. In contrast, *polite, shy* wines are harder to "get to know" and the wine drinker has to pay close attention to the taste and aroma.

Many of the descriptors from human personality domains are used mainly in wine evaluation. These include *charming, diplomatic, friendly, classy, laid-back, easy-going* and *approachable*. Except for Thurber's cartoon, I never encountered *pretentious* as a wine descriptor, although I came across one wine described as *unpretentious*.

Sometimes meanings are stipulated by a wine writer. For example, Parker (1998: 1404) contrasts *intellectual* with *hedonistic*.

> Certain styles of wine are meant to be inspected and are more introspective and intellectual. Others are designed to provide cheer delight, joy, and euphoria. Hedonistic wines can be criticized because in one sense they provide so much ecstasy and they can be called obvious, but in essence they are totally gratifying wines meant to fascinate and enthrall—pleasure at its best.

Hedonistic is obviously a term of high praise, but in addition I would interpret it as a *forward* and *assertive* wine. *Intellectual* and *introspective* wines, on the other hand, are *shyer* and more *reticent*.

Another set of new descriptors comes from the semantic field of artefact production. Wines are made, of course, but recent additions to the vocabulary include *crafted, sculpted, tightly-built* and possibly *polished* (all of which are positive). The word *manufactured* is, however, negative. A manufactured wine is made "not in a vineyard but by a chemist" (*Wine Spectator*, Jan 31, 2001:82).

Many of the newer words for describing mouthfeel come from the domain of expressions related to the human body. (*Body* is already a semantic extension, but this meaning no longer seems metaphorical.) The term *structure*, along with *backbone* and *frame* are used. For example, Sogg writes "In red wine the backbone mostly comes from tannin". (*Wine Spectator* 2001:139). Other words may be influenced by our current interest in fitness, giving us *brawny, fleshy, stout, muscular, beefy, big-boned* and *chunky* for heavy wines, and *lean, sleek, sinewy* and *svelte* for light ones.

An interesting set of words are elaborations on the properties of balance. Positive descriptors include *integrated, well-defined, focused, formed* and *assembled*, and negative ones, the opposites, are *disjointed, unfocused, muddled, uncoordinated* and *diffuse*. "Wines that are focused have flavors that integrate. Also the scents, aromas, and flavours are precise and clearly delineated" (Parker, 1998, 1403).

Textiles provide other metaphors. *Open knit* or *loose knit* can be added to other fabric descriptors, like *silky, satiny* and *velvety*. The interpretation, however, is related to integration.

Related to the age words, but focusing more on readiness to drink, are *open* and *closed*. Whereas *open* wines are ready for drinking, a *closed* wine is one that "is not showing its potential, which remains *locked in* because it is too young" (Parker, 1998: 1403). *Tight, tightly wound* and *tightly coiled* are also used for "immature and underdeveloped" wine (Robards, 1984: 35). Another recent word is *precocious*, referring to a wine that matures quickly. Recent uses of *forward* also have this meaning, a different sense from that described above. The opposite of both is *backward*, meaning "slow to develop" (Robards, *ibid.*). Closely related to *backward* is *dumb*, in the sense of *mute*, which Parker defines as "closed, but more pejorative. Closed wines may need time to reveal their richness: dumb wines may never be better" (1998: 1403).

ISSUES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Although many of these wine words are cute and amusing, they have implications for various topics discussed by philosophers of language, for example, truth conditions, metaphor, synonymy and interpretation. I will put aside some controversies that are important to many philosophers of language, such as which parts of meaning and interpretation

belong to semantics and which to pragmatics and concentrate only on what a phrase like *svelte* wine can mean in a wine conversation.

There are three issues raised by the data on wine descriptions. 1) Who determines what words mean? 2) How are we able to interpret these metaphors? 3) What are the implications for synonymy?

EXPERTS, KINDS OF
Putnam (1975) has proposed a theory where there is a division of labour such that some speakers (experts) have the authority to determine the meaning and application of certain words. Others in the language community, if they use these words, will try to deploy them like the experts, or at least accede to the judgment of those experts. Let's look first at the speakers and writers who talk about wine.

First of all there are the oenologists—the wine scientists for whom a precise vocabulary is used and understood in the same way by other oenologists. Their vocabulary is both larger in some ways and more restricted than others. It is larger in that many more technical terms from chemistry and related fields are used; it is restricted in that trendy, novel, metaphorical words are considered inappropriate for scientific publications. This is the group Putnam would consider as expert with respect to wine words. Most modern wine-makers probably belong in this group as well—at least those who learned their trade in a university.

The second group of experts consists of individuals in the wine trade, sommeliers, wine drinkers who have learned about wine through reading, attending seminars on wine, drinking wines, and. finally, wine writers. The wine writers generate most of the new terms. They try to communicate with a whole range of wine drinkers from those who are very knowledgeable to novices. But in addition, as writers they want to write interesting and colourful prose. For example, if one is evaluating and describing thirty Merlots from California, commenting on the body in each, it is boring to read *wine A is full-bodied, wine B is light, wine C is very heavy*, etc. Therefore, the prose can be enlivened with synonyms, near synonyms, metaphors and a variety of other associations. If all the writers who use terms like *unfocused, polished* and *intellectual* agree on the properties denoted, then these are or can become conventional wine descriptors, and the writers become the experts on these words. Some words can have their meanings stipulated, such as those by Parker,

quoted above. If other writers pick up on them with the same sense, then these words, too, join the wine vocabulary. Other experts will understand these new words whether or not they use them because they read wine literature. This second group of experts will defer to the scientists, especially on technical terms. But they are unconcerned with the fact that scientists disapprove of their flamboyant vocabulary.

The last group, novices and other less experienced wine drinkers, may try to learn how to use these terms the way the experts do without realising that there are different kinds of experts. When such individuals encounter a sentence like *Wine A is feminine*, they are often puzzled, but when I link *feminine* to *light, perfumed* and *delicate*, they quickly see the relationship and catch on to decoding process. Then they can discern what a *masculine* wine must be. (In terms of expertise, there is a very wide range between expert and novice.)

Putnam's theory works reasonably well for wine talk. Yet it is over-simplified because there exists a chain of "respect", from the novices, who defer to the expertise of wine writers and wine sellers, who in turn defer to the scientists (Lehrer & Wagner, 1981). People connected by chains of respect give rise to a consensual use of words resulting from convergence toward the appropriate consensual weight to assign to wine drinkers, sellers and scientists in their use of wine descriptors. This may result in the scientists receiving so high a consensual weight that all defer to them concerning some descriptors, *corked*, for example, whereas scientists would probably receive no greater weight than others for their use of *delicious*. Deference to experts or the refusal to defer depends on context and other factors influencing the assignment of weights (Lehrer and Lehrer, 1994).

UNDERSTANDING METAPHORS AND EVALUATING TRUTH
A method for interpreting wine metaphors is not necessarily appropriate for understanding Shakespeare's sonnets or Wallace Stevens' poetry. Semantic field theory is useful in understanding how and why whole sets of new words suddenly enter the lexicon of wine description. According to field theory, the vocabulary of a language is organised according to conceptual clusters, for example, kinship, animals, cooking words, or emotion words, and within each field the lexical items are structured according to an inventory of lexical relationships (synonymy, antonymy,

hyponymy, incompatibility, etc). When a word from one semantic domain, for example, personality or body type, is applied to another domain, such as wine, then other words in that field can tag along and will retain their same relationships. For example, if *muscular* can be applied to wine, then *svelte* can be, too, and it will be employed as an opposite for wine as it is for body type. ˙

Utterances (or sentences) can be evaluated for truth, after they are interpreted. How would one evaluate the truth conditions of an utterance like *Wine A is brawny*? If *brawny* is interpreted *full-bodied*, which is a synonym of "heavy" in wine discourse, either by convention or by associational links, then if Wine A is indeed heavy, the sentence is true. With some predicates, like *heavy*, things are more complicated because *heavy* is a scalar term. So a wine could be evaluated in terms of various norms: for all wines, for red wines, for Merlots, for Merlots from California, from a particular year, winery, etc. Therefore, any utterance must be indexed for the relevant context (and other things as well). In my research on how people apply words to wines, often miscommunication arises because different wine-drinkers are using different norms.

Some writers on metaphor have argued (or asserted) that metaphors cannot be paraphrased, or that if they are, the point of the metaphor is lost. I would certainly agree in the case of poetry, but wine description *is* description. Whether or not a wine description like *brawny* evokes images is an empirical question. Perhaps it does for some people, or maybe only before it becomes a conventional part of the wine vocabulary. If metaphors evoke images and other kinds of associations, that reflects on the vivid prose of the writer. But one can see why wine scientists would ignore this effect since they are presenting scientific information.

SYNONYMY

A controversial proposal with which I will conclude concerns synonymy. There are many wine words that mean *heavy*: *big, robust, fat, solid* in the older literature, and *brawny, muscular, big-boned, fleshy* and *stout* in contemporary writing. Certainly in isolation these words are not synonymous and any dictionary would give them different definitions. This is because each word has a range of senses that differ from one another. If those who use these terms as wine descriptors were to define

them, I suspect that they would come up with discrete definitions. A *muscular* wine might have properties a,b,c,d, a *brawny* wine a,b,c,e, and a *big-boned* wine a,c,d,f. My impression is that the differences are in fact neutralised and that most of these words become synonyms in wine discourse. However, even if semantic differences can be expressed by definitions and paraphrases, can wine experts consistently apply these words to wines in a differential way? Can they consistently and consensually distinguish between *brawny, muscular* and *big-boned* wines? This is an interesting empirical question.

The same point can be made with words from other semantic fields, for instance *focused* and *integrated*. As with words associated with body-building, these descriptors could perhaps be differentiated by words—that is, by careful definitions, but it remains open whether a sentence like "Wine X is not focused but it is still integrated" would be labelled as contradictory. Moreover, I would be surprised if a panel of wine experts could consistently distinguish and agree on wines that are *focused* but not *integrated* and vice versa.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have sketched out how new, trendy, wine descriptors can be linked by intra-linguistic relationships and associations to a basic vocabulary of perception. Through these links a speaker or writer can use old metaphors and associations and create new ones, and hearers and readers can construct interpretations that are close to the speaker's intentions. Many new terms are invented by wine writers who want both to enrich their wine descriptions and entertain readers. After all, there is pleasure in both drinking wine and talking about it. Moreover, linguistic playfulness and creativity is highly valued today in advertising, journalism and other domains.

Utterances that use these colourful and novel words can be true or false, but they must be indexed in ways that are often inexplicit; this may well lead to miscommunication at the level of application, that is, in the way that words are applied to wines, even if there is agreement that *muscular* is the same as or similar to *heavy*. Many words in the wine domain are synonyms, although in other contexts they are not. The consequence is that any theory of meaning has to take into account the fact that most words are polysemous, that is, they have several related meanings. Also a

theory requires an understanding of the intra-linguistic relationships among senses of words as well as among the words themselves.

There are intriguing questions that remain to be answered, but they are empirical issues. Does a phrase like *muscular wine* trigger visual images in some people? Do wine experts agree on the intra-linguistic links and metaphorical meanings of new wine descriptors? Will playful new words remain as descriptors or will they, like slang, be quickly replaced by new terms? What other discourses are like wine? I don't know the answer to these questions, but I would love to find out.

APPENDIX

LEXICAL STRUCTURE

The main lexical relationships found in the wine vocabulary are synonymy, antonymy, class inclusion (hyponymy), and incompatibility. In addition, there is a more general, somewhat vaguer notion of association, which also plays a significant role.

Synonymy is a familiar concept which has been discussed and analysed at length by philosophers, linguists, and lexicographers. Since most words have a range of senses, it is rare to find two words that are complete synonyms, allowing substitutability in all contexts. Therefore, we use the term *synonym* in a looser way for words that can substitute for each other in some salient contexts. For example, *big* and *large* are synonymous in the semantic field of size, but each word has other senses not shared by both. So a *big brother* is not necessarily a *large brother*. In the wine vocabulary, a type of partial synonymy is very common.

Antonymy is also a familiar lexical relationship although philosophers of language have not examined it as much as other structures. There are several types of antonyms, the most interesting of which are gradable opposites, such as *heavy* and *light*. In these structures there is a scale with a middle point or a middle interval, and the antonyms name opposite parts of the scale. Gradable antonyms are closely connected to comparative structures. The operators *more, less, very* and a few others modify terms, most often adjectives, on this scale, as illustrated in Figure 1.

<div align="center">

heavy   light

<— very, more   very, more —>

less, not as —> <— less, not as
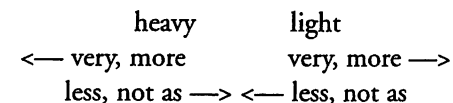
</div>

Figure 1: Weight Scale

Sometimes a gradable scale will be lexicalised by two antonymous pairs, an inner and an outer pair, as with *hot, warm, cool, cold,* the middle interval occurring between *warm* and *cool*. An interesting feature of the temperature scale is that the middle interval, in limited contests, is also named by *tepid* or *lukewarm*.

Incompatibility refers to contrast sets like *dog, cat, horse, pig, snake* etc. where to assert that *X is a dog* entails that *X is not a cat, horse, pig* or *snake*. Antonyms are a subtype of incompatibility, so to say *Wine X is heavy* entails that *Wine X is not light*.

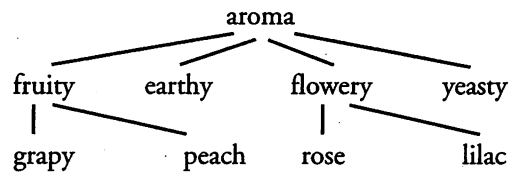Class inclusion and incompatibility together give us a taxonomic structure. Consider Fig 2.

Figure 2

Entailment relationships hold between a word and any words above it in the taxonomy. For example, the sentence *Wine X has a peach aroma* entails *Wine X has a fruity aroma* and *Wine X has an aroma*. A wine can be both *fruity* and *earthy* because it can have both properties.

Association is a general, loose term that is not strictly semantic. It is a term employed by psychologists, but I am using it here for other kinds of semantic relationships, including emotive and connotative (in the linguistic sense) meanings. For example, *heavy* and *big* are not normally synonymous, but they are in wine descriptions. This kind of association arises because in our everyday experience, big things tend to be heavy and vice-versa.

Any truth conditional analysis will have to deal with indexical, contextual, and metaphorical constraints on truth conditions, either in the semantics or pragmatics. Indexicals include pronouns, tense, and deictics of time and place.

Context includes the norms. If A says, "This 1999 BV Cabernet Sauvignon wine is heavy," what is the reference class? Also in the category one might place the audience. An audience of wine writers might be willing to evaluate an utterance like "This wine is brawny," while an audience of oenologists might regard it at meaningless.

Metaphor provides interesting problems with a huge literature. I will only point out that some philosophers, like Goodman and Kittay handle

the truth conditions of metaphor in their semantics, while many others, e.g., Davidson and Reimer, place it in the pragmatics. My account leaves that question open.