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Spatial Concepts in *wide* and *broad*

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Representation of extralinguistic space in grammars and lexicons of languages has been studied by linguists for several decades. This study reports the results of a detailed analysis of two (arguably synonymous) expressions that English speakers use to talk about one of the spatial dimensions – *wide* and *broad*. Examples were retrieved from four small corpora (Brown, Frown, LOB, FLOB) and the BNC and taxonomised with a view to certain spatial concepts. It was argued that the difference between the two synonyms is one of perspective, crucial to which is the notion of boundaries, used in cognitive frameworks. The study is a contribution to the field of lexical semantics.

Representation of space in various languages has been at the centre of linguistic interest for several decades. Mine was a more modest aim: a detailed comparative analysis of two English expressions for one spatial dimension where Czech has a single word. Since *tall* and *high* have been studied already (cf. Dirven and Taylor 1988), I focused on the other pair – *wide* and *broad*.

Naturally, I started with dictionaries. A contrastive account can be found in Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms and in a short note on usage (of the word *dimension*) in the 4th edition of Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD). In general dictionaries, however, definitions are often the same for both adjectives. Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English lists both *wide* and *broad* with many nominal collocates. Believing that what can be harvested from this seemingly partial issue must be reflected in more general perspectives I chose to go beyond the collocations.

I retrieved all collocations with *wide* and *broad* in their non-inflected forms from four corpora: Brown University Standard Corpus of Present-day American English (Brown), its British counterpart Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (LOB), and their 1990s updates: the Freiburg-Brown Corpus of American English (Frown), and the Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English (FLOB). Only referentially did I use the British National Corpus (BNC).

I manually counted the frequencies of individual collocates. Sorting them into those traditionally called concrete and abstract seemed to be the only plausible way to start organising the material. To be as objective as possible, I started with those nouns that collocated with one of the synonyms only. It was taken into consideration that *broad* is in general less frequent than *wide* (portmanteau cases excluded, BNC has 4,773 tokens of adjectival *broad* and 10,060 tokens of adjectival *wide*, that is, the adjectives occur in an overall ratio 1:2 in the BNC).

The fact that LOB, Brown, FLOB, and Frown are samples of two varieties of English (British and American) from two periods of time (1960s and 1990s) proved to be less of an advantage than expected. The size of the corpora did not allow for any convincing statements since there were never enough tokens to support some first sight observations (it was noted, for example, that with the noun *range* and with nouns denoting literal areas *broad* is used more frequently in American than in British English).

Table 1 *Wide* and *broad* in collocations with concrete nouns

		Brown	Frown	LOB	FLOB	total
wide	PURE DIMENSION	17	10	13	16	56
	DIMENSION INHERENTLY QUANTIFIED and the sense of AREA	49	39	55	45	188
broad	PURE DIMENSION	0	0	2	0	2
	DIMENSION INHERENTLY QUANTIFIED and the sense of AREA	31	14	18	27	90

Table 2 *Wide* and *broad* in collocations with abstract nouns

	Brown	Frown	LOB	FLOB	total
wide	44	41	63	60	208
broad	56	54	19	25	154

It follows from Table 1 and Table 2 that *broad* is more frequent with abstract nouns than with concrete nouns (in OALD we read that “it is more formal than *wide*”), and that with abstract nouns *broad* is more frequent in American corpora. However, *wide* also has a significant number of occurrences with abstract nouns (in fact, talking in absolute numbers, higher than *broad*). The far most frequent collocate of *wide* is *range*, which accounts for 24 per cent of all tokens of *wide* in the BNC, and together with *variety* for almost one third of all tokens of *wide* in the BNC.¹

In this paper I will focus on the collocations with concrete nouns. I will distinguish between a pure dimension and a dimension with inherent quantification:

a) **pure dimension**: the adjective is unmarked for quantification, only “covers a scale of measurement” (Quirk 1985: 471).² Interestingly, these uses prove to be much less frequent than what a high rank of this sense in dictionaries might suggest: there are only 56 such tokens of *wide*, and two of *broad*. Precise measurements are rare beyond technical, or more generally “informative” contexts (many tokens were found in the Skills, Trades, and Hobbies sections of the corpora); numbers given in the “imaginative” genres are often approximative only. The overall scarcity of measure phrases, however, could be a matter of extralinguistic

reality, that is, meeting the needs of language users and not those of the language system. The fact that *broad* is very infrequent and, when used, the entities described by it are quite large (*a great stone window 20 ft high and 8 ft broad* (LOB A11), *lace about four fingers broad* (LOB E01)), makes me conclude that *broad* is not favoured in this purely dimensional usage and is never neutral as to polarity (in Cambridge *broad* is defined as “very wide”).

b) dimension with inherent quantification: the adjective is marked for polarity, that is, in addition to the dimension it also expresses a relation to a certain norm (in this case ‘more than’) and is thus in opposition to *narrow*. Both *wide* and *broad* are found in that sense. Very often there is a potential shift towards ‘2-dimensionally large’ (a large distance from side to side often implies a large area between the sides). Although dictionaries seem to recognise the sense of ‘large’ for *broad* only (“if you describe something flat as broad, you mean that it is very large” (COBUILD)) and give *wide* only in collocations with *gaps* and *differences* (cf. “a wide difference or gap between two things, ideas, or qualities is a large difference or gap” (COBUILD)), *wide* is about three times as frequent as *broad* in the four corpora. Besides, *broad* is used with nouns denoting literal areas predominantly in American corpora (six times; there is only one token of *broad areas of light and gradations of tone* in a British corpus (FLOB G47)).

It becomes obvious that Euclidian geometry is much less deeply rooted in our usage of language than lexicographers tend to think. Very rarely are all three dimensions mentioned, let alone specified in numbers. Using the number of dimensions of an entity as a criterion for sorting the collocates is not possible, since dimensionality is a matter of construal, as linguists showed with prepositions.³ The “geometer’s” view (Clark 1973), in which *broad* and *wide* are used for the second, that is, the shorter of two horizontal dimensions (in Manfred Bierwisch’s terminology that sense of the German adjective *breit* which can be described with markers (+Pol) [(1 Space) [*[(+Second)]]]), is very frequently replaced with views in which the metrics is irrelevant (cf. Vandeloise 1988) and *wide* even refers to the maximal, and/or the only one mentioned dimension of an object (the technical term *wide screen*, the Czech for ‘landscape orientation’ *na šířku*, literally ‘on width’). *Wide* then means no more than ‘distance from side to side’, that is, as seen or measured from the “observer’s” point of view,⁴ and so it can be used not only in opposition to *long*, but also to the horizontal *deep*. *Broad* was not found in these uses because very often measuring was involved; cf. *to make a book of this kind, sheets of papyrus were glued edge to edge until a single sheet, often twenty to twenty-five feet wide had been made* (LOB D01).

Having sorted the non-abstract collocates of *wide* and *broad*, I propose that the difference between the two adjectives is the one of perspective. Entities in extralinguistic reality have sides, and those can be seen as their boundaries. “In the prototypical conceptualization, a boundary touches or constitutes the outermost portion of a bounded quantity, so that the boundary ‘encloses’ the bounded quantity, and the bounded quantity lies ‘within’ the boundary” (Talmy 2000: 50).⁵ What I suggest is that when using *wide* we view an entity referred to by the noun which it modifies as having boundaries, when using *broad*, we do not. If there objectively are any boundaries, they are ignored. Therefore: whenever the entity’s boundaries are, or can be perceived as impenetrable limits, *wide* is expected. Whenever they are ignored, *broad* is preferred. In this view, *wide* is static, *broad* is dynamic. *Wide* means ‘within the limits’, ‘between the left end and the right end’, *broad* is ‘across the limits’, ‘from here away’. *Wide* is ‘between’, *broad* is ‘beyond’. *Wide* is straightforward, *broad* is blurred. *Wide* is discrete, *broad* is vague, fuzzy, and diffuse. Taking one more step means saying that seeing things with their boundaries, in their entirety often implies seeing

them from the outside; hence perhaps some sort of an external, and therefore objective perspective evoked by *wide*, not by *broad*.

This explains why *broad* is infrequent in measure phrases; something not seen as extending ‘from here to here’, most typically from the outside, that is, something not seen objectively, is hard to measure.

When reference is made to hollow entities, with no intervening surface between the sides, *wide* is preferred (“*wide* [...] is the preferred term when the emphasis is upon the distance between limits rather than on the intervening surface” (Merriam-Webster 116)). This is because hollow entities are delimited predominantly by their boundaries, and so the boundaries cannot be ignored. *Wide* only was *decolletage*; *broad* was not found with literal *gaps, hollows, holes, gateways, doorways, and entrances*. Only once did *broad* collocate with *corridors*: ... *a restrictive plan (again reminiscent of the Edinburgh gallery) of corridors and small inter-connecting rooms. In the broad and continuous corridor on the first floor ...* (FLOB C09). In the BNC there was one token of *room* described as *broad*: ... *the thin line of squares alternately black and white ... disappeared into the distant side walls of the broad games room ...* (BNC H7F). In these cases, however, it can be argued that the room and corridor are so large as to be viewed, even from inside (because this is how rooms, for example, are usually experienced), as open space. A *deep drainage ditch* was *too broad to leap over unless you were an Olympic star* (Brown L04), and the *space between the forked branches* (LOB G29) was described as *broad* because it was again open space (reference was made to a tree).

This interpretation prevents *broad* from being used about *eyes* and *mouth* but predicts it in collocations with nouns denoting the other parts of the body; we are more than hesitant to see the human body as a thing extending ‘from here to here’. *Broad* was more frequent than *wide* with body parts such as *chest* (3:1), *shoulders* (4:1), only *broad* was *back* (3) and *pelvises* (1). *Grin* occurred with *broad* and *wide* twice and once respectively, *smile* three and four times. Both *broad* and *wide* were *cheekbones* (1:1), *forehead* (2:1), *broad* only *jaw* (1), and *noses* (2), once described as *flattish*. There were two tokens of *wide hands*, but also one of *broad hands*, curiously described as *small* at the same time: *Her clothes, her hair, everything about her is both graceful and simple. She has small, broad, capable hands and an enormous energy* (Brown G34). *Fingers*, too, were described as *broad* (and again *flat*): *Grabski had never seen so much money. His broad flat fingers, petrified into massive sausages by years of bricklaying, snatched the bills clumsily* (Brown K17). *Broad* was once used even about a man: *Rossi was tall, but he did not tower above Durieux; he was broad yet not significantly wider than Durieux; but he was unmistakably the more aggressive* (LOB N23); *wide* collocated with *man* four times (three were comparisons of equivalence). *Corpse* was described as *broad* too: *It (i.e. corpse) was almost the height of Garman, and broad. Its skin seemed scaly and, though losing its lustre in death, strongly suggestive of the tortured rainbow that writhed over it* (FLOB N17). To summarise, these collocations with nouns denoting the human body or its parts show convincingly that *broad* is not only quantitative, but also qualitative, and very frequently evaluative, that is, subjective.

In the usage marked for polarity the number of occurrences with *broad* approached or exceeded the general 1:2 (*broad:wide*) ratio in collocations with nouns denoting traffic routes: *highways* 4:1, *avenues* 1:1, *streets* 3:7 (there were additional four tokens of the lexicalised *Broad Street*; cf. also *Broadway*). *Roads* were, perhaps for phonetic reasons, only *wide* in my corpora (Brown L04), but in the BNC *broad* was found too (5:27, e.g. ... *to succumb would be the broad and easy road to hell* (BNC FP1)). *Broad* only were *rush-hour traffic routes*, and *weir*. With *stairs, staircases, stairways, flights of stairs* and *steps*, again, both *broad* and *wide* were found (2:5).

A 2:3 ratio was found with *rivers* (two of the collocations with *wide* were comparisons of equivalence), *broad* only were *streams* (2). While *valleys* were *wide* in my corpora, in the BNC *broad* and *wide* compete (11:24; in OALD we read that “*broad* is often used, especially in literary language, to describe features of the landscape”). *Bay* was only *broad* (1), strips of land both *broad* and *wide* (2:2).

Broad were also literal *belts* (1:2), *broad* only *hem*, *rounded cordon*, and *red stripes down the trouser leg* (Brown G50), but *blue Garter Ribbon* (FLOB G11) and *strip of sticking plaster* (FLOB L20) were *wide*. *Hats* were five times *wide-brimmed* and three times *broad-brimmed*; *brim* was only *wide* (Brown P08). *Broad* were also *terraces* (2:1), *wings* (1:1), *broad* only *desk* and even *taillights* (*Fiona parted the parlor curtains: Kenneth Munro’s car was turning slowly up his driveway, its broad taillights reminding her, in the foggy dark, of a spaceship* (Frown K28)). To conclude, just these concrete uses are the most troublesome cases of competition.

This, however, is not surprising; rivers, streams, roads, highways, avenues, streets, strips of land can perhaps be seen in two ways: from the outside, as objects with clear-cut boundaries, or as unbounded entities that spread and extend. Nouns denoting various kinds of literal areas collocate with both *broad* and *wide* exactly because their referents can be seen in both perspectives (literal *areas* collocated more often with *wide* than with *broad* (2:15), *wide* only was *sea*, *skies*, *world*, *domains*, *expanse of shadeless parking lot* and *of water*; *broad* were *meadows*, *zones*, *platform*, *grass flat* and *coastal plain*). But perhaps also objects such as hems, brims, belts, stripes, terraces and windows can be seen in these two ways. *Valleys*, with which both *broad* and *wide* were used, allow for both perspectives. *Hills* were *wide* in my corpora, but a mountain in the Himalayas is called *Broad Peak*.

My interpretation accounts for the very general observation that *broad* is often used with abstract nouns; abstract concepts are less clearly delineated, and their boundaries harder to pinpoint. It explains collocations with certain nouns, e.g. *differences* tend to be *wide* (7:29 in the BNC) because they are abstract counterparts to distances, that is, ‘gaps’. Certain meaning shifts can perhaps be predicted (*use in to be in wide use* as opposed to *a broad use of a word*), and lexicalisation patterns accounted for (*worldwide* vs. *broadcast*; *broad jump*, *broad mind*, *Broad Church*, *broad accent*). A detailed analysis of these collocations with abstract nouns goes, however, far beyond the space I have in this paper.

Endnotes

- ¹ In the BNC there are 2,843 occurrences of *wide range*, and only 178 tokens of *broad range*. In my corpora there are only thirteen tokens of *broad range* (as opposed to 69 tokens of *wide range*). Interestingly, ten collocations with *broad* were found in American corpora (five in each Brown and Frown), the remaining three were all found in FLOB. *Wide range*, on the other hand, was found 5, 12, 18, and 34 times in Brown, Frown, LOB, and FLOB respectively, that is, more often in British than in American English, and with a tendency to increase in number over time.
- ² This is the case of measure phrases and *how*-questions. In seven out of eight cases of comparisons of equivalence the adjective can be seen as marked for quantification, cf. e.g. ... *the more wives he had, the more children could he beget and with the less inconvenience. A rich man – it was only reasonable – would buy as many women and as fat and with as **broad** pelvises as he could afford* (LOB K29).
- ³ “Prepositions can be grouped together and distinguished from each other in ways that correspond to the *ascription* of different *dimensionality* properties to the entity named by the following noun or noun phrase. In particular, the preposition ‘at’ is said to ascribe no

particular dimensionality to the referent of its associated noun, the preposition ‘on’ is said to ascribe to the referent of its complement the property of being a line or a surface, and the preposition ‘in’ is said to ascribe to the referent of its complement the notion of a bounded two-dimensional or three-dimensional space” (Fillmore 1997: 28).

- ⁴ “By (+Observ) we will mark an axis, by which an object is normally related to its observer or user, which is directed to the observer ... or away from him” (Bierwisch 1967: 17).
- ⁵ Talmy, and after him Ronald Langacker, argued that the concept of boundary underlies certain grammatical categories: “in application to nouns, state of boundedness largely corresponds to the traditional linguistic distinction between ‘mass’ and ‘count’, and in application to verbs it can correspond to the distinction between ‘imperfective’ and ‘perfective’” (Talmy 2000: 51).

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