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Based on authentic word usage from large corpora and other texts, Patrick Hanks proposes a lexically based, corpus-driven, bottom-up theory of language called the theory of norms and exploitations (TNE), which is expected to help explain how words go together in collocation patterns and how people use words to convey meaning.

Ch. 1 points out the need for a theory of norms and exploitations for the empirical analysis of meaning in language and presents the aims of the book. Ch. 2 takes a closer look at the various meanings of the term ‘word’. This chapter also explains the dynamic and infinite nature of the lexicon of a language and how new terms are constantly being created. Ch. 3 argues that words in isolation, instead of having meaning, only have meaning potential. Actual meanings only appear when people use words in specific context, whether verbal or situational.

Ch. 4 illustrates how Paul Grice’s conversational cooperation theory can help distinguish meaning-as-events and meaning potential. He distinguishes between ‘norms’ and ‘exploitations’: the former refers to patterns of ordinary usage in everyday language while the latter denotes the unusual and creative uses. Ch. 5 demonstrates the effectiveness of identifying normal complementation patterns by corpus analysis in terms of valency and lexical sets for determining a word’s meaning.

Ch. 6 addresses the issue of norms of usage change over time on the basis of large historical corpora. H emphasizes that when appreciating literary works from different periods, it is important to bear in mind the different norms of the time. Ch. 7 discusses the alternation of three regular patterns of usage in language: lexical alternations, semantic-type alternations, and syntactic alternations.

Ch. 8 is concerned with exploitation, which is a dynamic mechanism used to create new meanings and to say old things in new ways. Moreover, exploitation is also one mechanism for bringing new senses to a word. Various types of exploitations are also introduced in this chapter. In Ch. 9, H analyzes a few examples of how creative writers have exploited lexical and other norms of the English language and created new ones.

Ch. 10 elaborates on how the normal, conventional patterns of meaning and use of a word constitute a complex meaning gestalt, and how such gestalt is exploited in various ways. Ch. 11 explains how TNE is related to the philosophy of language and anthropology, citing the works of
language philosophers like Aristotle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hilary Putnam, and Paul Grice, and the ideas of anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Elenore Rosch, and Michael Tomasello. Ch. 12 discusses how TNE differs from other theories of language concerning the role of the lexicon, and finally, Ch. 13 summarizes the key notions of TNE, pointing out its theoretical significance and practical applications.

The book is of great interest for those who want to engage in empirical research in language-related areas such as cognitive linguistics, historical linguistics, computational linguistics, corpus linguistics, machine translation, and applied linguistics. It also has practical value for lexicographers, language teachers, and those involved in textbook compilation.