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Unusual something

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Abstract

This paper discusses what I refer to as ‘unusual something’, in which *something* takes a determiner and an adjective as premodifiers. It is widely accepted that the grammar of contemporary English does not allow *something* to take a determiner and be postmodified by an adjective. However, we frequently encounter ‘unusual something’ constructions, such as *a great something* and *the right something*. The two main aims of this paper are to describe the structural and functional characteristics of ‘unusual something’ from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives and to illustrate what ‘unusual something’ is. To achieve the first aim, I highlight the differences and similarities between the standard and deviant uses. For the second aim, I demonstrate that *something* in the deviant use functions as a placeholder or a metarepresentation of an antecedent element or the sender’s thought that is not linguistically realised.

Keywords: *something*, deviant use, premodification, placeholder, metarepresentation

1. Introduction

The title of this paper may seem strange, odd, or even unacceptable. This is because ‘something’ typically takes an adjective as a postmodifier, making ‘something unusual’ seem more natural. While we do not find the exact phrase *unusual something* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (henceforth, COCA), we do come across similar expressions, such as *a new something*, *the right something*, and *good somethings*. These instances demonstrate that ‘something’ can take both an indefinite and a definite determiner, and that it functions like a countable noun due to its plural form. We observe a few examples of the syntactically atypical pattern ‘determiner + adjective + *something*’. This pattern I call ‘unusual something’.

Let us begin by looking up the word *something* in one of the well-known dictionaries, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (henceforth, OALD), to observe its general uses in Present-day English. According to OALD, *something* has three senses: 1) a thing that is not known or mentioned by name; 2) a thing that is thought to be important or worth taking notice of; and 3) used to show that a description or an amount, etc. is not exact. Below are examples of each sense, respectively:

- (1)
 - a. There’s something wrong with the TV.
 - b. I could just eat a little something.
- (2)
 - a. There’s something in what he says.
 - b. ‘We should finish by tomorrow.’ ‘That’s something.’.
- (3)
 - a. a new comedy aimed at thirty-somethings
 - b. It tastes something like melon.

Example (1a) shows a typical and standard use of *something*: semantically, *something* refers to a particular thing, and syntactically, it is postmodified by the adjective *wrong*. In (1b), *a little something* is an idiomatic expression referring to snacks or refreshments, suggesting that *a little*

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something does not have a compositional meaning. Syntactically, *something* is premodified by *a little*. This phrase shares the same structure as what I refer to as ‘unusual something’—that is, determiner + adjective + *something*. However, when considering the semantic aspect, *a little something* should be distinguished from ‘unusual something’, as its meaning is not composed of two independent constituents.

In (2), *something* is typically used in isolation, without any modifiers. In (2a), the prepositional phrase *in what he says* modifies the predicate rather than *something*. Semantically, *something* in (2) differs from *something* in (1): as Sense 2 in OALD indicates, *something* refers to a thing that is thought to be important, but not a wide range or vague set of things. It also gives an evaluation made by the sender (the speaker or writer). In short, *something* is narrowed down to something important, impressive, or worth taking notice of—typically evaluated positively. From a formal or syntactic perspective, *something* is not modified by any adjectives, though it seems to be modified in semantic or pragmatic terms.

In (3), *something* is used to indicate approximations. In (3a), *thirty-somethings* refers to people aged between thirty-one and thirty-nine. It is noteworthy that the plural form *somethings* is used here, but it refers to people, not ages. This makes it fundamentally different from *good somethings* mentioned earlier, which we will discuss in more detail later. Example (3b) could mean almost the same as ‘It tastes like melon’. *Something* seems to have minimal meaning on its own and functions primarily as an element that emphasises the similarity in taste to melon. It contributes to the approximation of the taste expressed by the phrase *something like melon*.

Let us now examine some instances of what I refer to as ‘unusual something’, all of which are cited from COCA.

(4) a. Neil Young’s Book Is Not A Great Memoir, But It’s **A Great Something**
b. She glanced at her brother and could tell he was struggling to find something—**the right something**—to say.

It is widely accepted that the grammar of contemporary English allows *something* to be postmodified by an adjective, so this raises the question of whether (4a) and (4b) are grammatical. Given that contemporary dictionaries classify *something* as a pronoun, they would be predicted to be ungrammatical. However, if the pronoun *something* were converted into a noun, that prediction would go in the opposite direction. This suggests that we should consider whether *something* is categorised as a pronoun, a noun, or something else. At the very least, both (4a) and (4b) make sense. (4a) would mean something like ‘It may be inappropriate to call Young’s book a great memoir, but it might well be called a great one, though I’m not sure what I should call it instead of “memoir”.’ Probably, the sender has in mind a vague, or more precisely ineffable, notion that could appropriately or exactly indicate what is referred to by *A Great Something*, so they have no choice but to use *something* to try to put an ineffable thought into words. (4b), on the other hand, shows that the sender replaces *something* with *the right something* to narrow down something to say (something she was struggling to find) to something right to say. The definite determiner in *the right something* helps the receiver (the hearer and reader) identify or gain access to something the sender has just mentioned. *Something* in (4b) is similar to a typical use of *something*, except that it accompanies the definite determiner and the adjective. In (4a), by contrast, it looks closer to a pronoun or a pro-form for a noun.

The aim of this paper is to describe an unusual use of *something* in which it takes a determiner and an adjective as a premodifier. The next section provides a diachronic perspective by observing how the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) describes *something*. Section 3, by contrast, takes a synchronic perspective to illustrate differences and similarities between the usual and unusual uses of *something* and to demonstrate that what I call ‘unusual something’ functions as a placeholder.

2. A diachronic view: how OED describes *something*

This section observes how OED describes the meanings and uses of *something*. As is well known, OED presents the meanings (or senses) of a word in chronological order, allowing us to trace the shifts in the meanings of a word. Let us introduce some senses relevant to my discussion, which are shown as Sense 1, Sense 3, and Sense 5 in (5)–(7), respectively:

(5) OED (s.v. *something*)

- Sense 1. a. Some unspecified or indeterminate thing (material or immaterial).
 - b. Used as a substitute for a name or part of one, or other particular, which is not remembered or is immaterial, etc. Also used as a substitute for a number unknown or unspecified.
 - c. Some liquor, drink, or food; esp. in **to take something**.
 - f. **or seomthing** (colloquial), used to express an indistinct or unknown alternative.
- Sense 3. a. Followed by an adjective.
 - b. **something damp** or **short**, a drink; spirits. *slang* or *colloquial*.
 - c. **something (good or special)**, a useful racing tip.
- Sense 5. With article or demonstrative pronoun, or in plural (=sense 1):
 - a. With adjective preceding. Also in **a little something**: some food or drink; a snack; refreshments. Cf. sense 1c.

As shown in (5), Sense 1a, which started to be used around 1,000, indicates the original meaning of *something*, corresponding to Sense 1 in OALD. Sense 1a (some unspecified or indeterminate thing) can be narrowed down to Sense 1c (something to eat or drink). Sense 1c in Present-day English would require contextual information, such as a phrase that explicitly expresses some purpose. It is true that Sense 1c is narrower than Sense 1a, but it is still somewhat unspecified in that *something* can indicate an alcoholic drink, but not specifically beer, wine, or vodka. Sense 1f illustrates the meaning and use of *or something* rather than *something* in itself: ‘The car hit a tree or something’ (OALD). Overstreet (1999) calls *or something* a ‘general extender’, which indicates ‘additional members of a list, set, or category’ and makes ‘it possible for the hearer to infer a category the speaker has in mind’ (*ibid.* 11). In that example, *or something* seems to contribute to extending the category of a tree or making the hearer infer a set of trees and their equivalents. It can cause category extension but not specification or identification. Sense 1b is more interesting in usage than in meaning. Take an example from OALD (s.v. *something*): His name is Alan *something*. *Something* like this is used when the sender does not know or remember Alan’s family name. It might be filled with Turing, Rickman, or Smith depending on the context. It seems to function like a personal pronoun, which can be contextually satisfied with its referent. However, *something* is expected to be satisfied with a family name, but it might or might not refer to a specific one. Thus, the semantic feature that all the senses have in common is indeterminacy.

Chronologically, Sense 1a has been used for over 1,000 years, while Senses 1b and 1c began to be used in the late 18th century. OED records that the first instance of Sense 1f appeared around 200 years ago. This indicates that senses other than Sense 1a emerged relatively recently.

As (6) shows, Sense 3a demonstrates the fundamental usage of *something*: it is followed by an adjective. The same applies to Senses 3b and 3c, which are special or specific cases of Sense 3a. *Something* of *something damp* and *something short*, as in Sense 3b, is, like Sense 1c, narrowed down to alcoholic drinks. The adjective is obviously useful in clarifying the sense of *something*. Likewise, *something (good or special)* in Sense 3c has an idiomatic meaning as well, though it may not be clear whether the adjective contributes to the overall meaning. More importantly, Senses 3b and 3c require context in which they are used, whereas Sense 3a does not necessarily. Sense 3b is likely to occur in situations involving meals and drinks, and Sense 3c in contexts

related to horse racing. Such contextual information helps the receiver specify the meaning of *something*.

Note, however, that Sense 3a has been used since the 14th century, whereas Sense 3b started to appear 200 years ago and Sense 3c 120 years ago. The syntactic structure ‘*something* + adjective’, which was fully conventionalised and established in the time of Middle English, is still available in Present-day English. As a result, it is unarguably accepted as the standard use, and I call it ‘usual *something*’ (as opposed to ‘unusual *something*’) in this paper.

Sense 5 in (7) is the most relevant to my discussion. What is most important in Sense 5 is illustrating the usage of what I call ‘unusual *something*’: the syntactically deviant pattern ‘determiner + adjective + *something*’ (e.g. *a little something*) is permissible, its main constituent *something* can be pluralised, and it retains the same meaning as Sense 1. Take a look at the chronologically first and second instances of the singular *something* for Sense 5a from OED below:

(8) a. A little something was allowed in the morning, but without a name. (1577)
b. A very slender something in a Fable. (1661)

(8a) shows that the idiomatic phrase *a little something* first appeared in 1577. This phrase might have provided a clue for making ‘unusual *something*’ possible and even productive.¹ This possibility seems to be supported by (8b), which contains the adjective *slender*, used attributively to describe the characteristics of what is or can be referred to by *something*, rather than to convey the sender’s evaluation of it. This suggests that a variety of attributive adjectives can be used to pre-modify *something*. In OED, adjectives other than *special* include *indeterminate*, *nameless*, *soft*, and *airy*.

Sense 5 demonstrates that what I call ‘unusual *something*’ is not a brand-new use but a somewhat established one. OED does not label Sense 5 as ‘obsolete’. It is clear, however, that ‘unusual *something*’ is less frequent than ‘usual *something*’ (i.e., *something* + adjective) and that many grammar books on contemporary English prescribe that *something* is postmodified by an adjective. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 423), incorporating insights from generative syntax, illustrate that it is not possible for *something* to ‘take internal pre-head dependents’ because it derives from the compounding of the determinative base *some* and the nominal one *thing*. In short, *something* is a fused word, and no modifiers (which they refer to as ‘dependents’) can be located before it. They add that adjectives ‘occur after the compound determinatives *something*, *anyone*, *nobody*, etc.’ (*ibid.* p.528).² They also note that *something* can take no more than one adjective: **something new exciting* (cf. *something new and exciting*). Normal nouns, by contrast, can take more than one adjective: *a new exciting project*. It is concluded that ‘unusual *something*’, which can be recognised as deviant from the standard use of *something*, is now a marginal, though historically established, usage.

Quirk et al. (1985: 379) also point out that *something* ‘cannot be premodified by adjectives’, but instead follows adjectival modification, such as *something nice for dinner*. However, they do

¹ According to OED (s.v. *little* n), the fixed phrase *a little*, defined as ‘a small quantity of’, began to appear in the first half of the 1,400s. The first instance recorded by OED is ‘a lytyl hauynge, or a lytyl myght’ (which literally corresponds to ‘a little having, or a little might’). This demonstrates that the pattern ‘*a little* + noun’ was already established in the 1,400s, which might support my speculation that the idiomatic phrase *a little something* triggered the deviant pattern ‘determiner + adjective + *something*’. However, this remains merely a speculation, and I do not have any evidence to support my idea.

² Huddleston and Pullum (2002) treat *something* as a compound determinative. However, many dictionaries classify it as a pronoun. As I will show in footnote 3, Quirk et al. (1985) also regard it as a (compound indefinite) pronoun.

not overlook instances where *something* is premodified by an adjective. They consider this kind of *something* a ‘deviation’ from the regular form and briefly state in a footnote that *something* is ‘not being used as compound indefinite pronouns ... but as nouns’ (*ibid.* p. 1294): *That nasty something has reappeared.*³ They paraphrase this sentence as: ‘You mentioned seeing *something nasty*; well, the thing you called “something” has reappeared’. Their paraphrase is essential and insightful: *something* in this example is, in a sense, echoic, or a repeated form of *something* mentioned immediately above. To support their view, consider a clearer example from COCA:

(9) Drum and bass, Johnson says, “went super fast and super technical, and super—it just seemed like they were filling every space with the sound.” They wanted to hear something new, and **that new something** was dubstep.

In (9), *that new something* is based on its antecedent *something new* in the preceding clause. It might be paraphrased in Quirk et al.’s way as follows: ‘The sender mentioned they wanted to hear *something new*; well, the thing they called “something” was dubstep’. This demonstrates why the demonstrative article *that* is used in this phrase: it helps the receiver access the antecedent more easily. More interestingly and importantly, the adjective *new* shifts from a postmodifier to a pre-modifier. This suggests that *something* might behave more like a noun than a (compound definite) pronoun, that it might be converted to something else, or that it might be put to a special use.

As far as I know, it is not enough to study the deviant form ‘determiner + adjective + *something*’. Before analysing it, I will illustrate the differences and similarities between the standard and non-standard uses of *something* in the next section.

3. A synchronic view: how ‘unusual something’ is characterised

The main aims of this section are to describe the structural and functional characteristics of ‘unusual something’ and to illustrate what ‘unusual something’ is. To achieve the first aim, I will highlight the differences and similarities between the standard and deviant uses in terms of both structural (syntactic) and functional (semantic) aspects. For the second aim, I propose that what I call ‘unusual something’ is a metarepresentational use of ‘usual something’, which has a standard or basic use and the original meaning (i.e. ‘Some unspecified or indeterminate thing’, as in Sense 1a of OED), and *something* in ‘unusual something’ functions as a placeholder (henceforth, PH).

3.1. Differences between ‘usual something’ and ‘unusual something’

Let us look at some differences between the standard pattern (i.e. ‘usual something’) and the deviant one (i.e. ‘unusual something’). First, the most important and decisive difference, as mentioned above, lies in the word order: *something* normally precedes or is postmodified by a single adjective, but, in exceptional cases, follows or is premodified by one or more adjectives. Additionally, ‘unusual something’ can take more than one adjective, as shown in (10):

(10) “There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though **a vast, invisible something** was soaring through the air—instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead.”

In (10), *something* is premodified by two adjectives without any coordinating conjunctions. By contrast, **something vast invisible* is ungrammatical. Thus, the two uses are fundamentally

³ Quirk et al. refer to *something* as ‘a compound indefinite pronoun’ and consider it a type of pronoun. Their view is consistent with the traditional perspective, as reflected in the labels used by many dictionaries in the entry for *something*. This contrasts with Huddleston and Pullum’s view, based on generative syntax, which treats *something* as consisting of the determinative *some* as the head and the noun *thing*.

different in whether *something* precedes or follows an adjective, and in how many adjectives it can take.

Second, the two uses differ in whether or not they can take a determiner. Obviously, ‘usual something’ cannot, in principle, follow any determiners because it already contains the determiner *some*. ‘Unusual something’, on the other hand, can take a determiner, including the indefinite article *a(n)*, the definite article *the*, the zero determiner (in the case of the plural form *somethings*), demonstratives like *that* and *this*, possessives or genitives, numerals, and even *some*. The examples below are all self-explanatory:

(11) a. Neil Young’s Book Is Not A Great Memoir, But It’s **A Great Something** (=4a))
b. She glanced at her brother and could tell he was struggling to find something—**the right something**—to say. (=4b))
c. Craig liked my cats, but he wouldn’t admit to it, calling them “**Stupid somethings**,” tossing them pieces of shrimp as we sat eating naked in bed at dusk.
d. In 1977, Warren Bankston won something very special. Last week, he lost it. **That special something** was a diamond-studded Super Bowl ring, a trophy from Mr. Bankston’s championship season with the Oakland Raiders.
e. **Collip’s “mysterious something”** is the internal secretion of the pancreas—a hormone that the team names “Insulin.”⁴
f. The Dey took something from his sleeve, a transparent vial, and unstopped it. He inverted it, and **two small somethings** tumbled out onto the back of Pallaton’s neck.
g. I think humans always want to try and find some lesson, **some positive something** to be learned, even out of natural disasters.

(11a) and (11b) contain the indefinite and definite determiners respectively. (11c) is an example of the zero determiner: the plural form does not always require a determiner. *Something* often takes a demonstrative determiner, as in (11d), and occasionally a possessive or genitive, as in (11e). In (11f) and (11g), *something* follows the numeral *two* and the quantifier *some* respectively. The presence of a determiner is a defining characteristic of ‘unusual something’.

Third, (11) also shows that the two uses differ in terms of countability: *something* must be singular in the standard use, whereas it can take both singular and plural forms in the non-standard use. Consider (11c) and (11f). In (11c), the plural *stupid somethings* refers to the sender’s cats that Craig liked. In (11f), *two small somethings* refers to two things that the sender (the speaker and writer) could not specify or describe. In (11d), on the other hand, the singular form *that special something* refers to a diamond-studded Super Bowl ring that Bankston lost last week. These examples show that *something* in the non-standard use varies depending on whether it corresponds to one referent or more. It should be noted, however, that the singular form does not necessarily refer to a single entity. In (11b), for example, *the right something* does not necessarily mean there is just one thing he wanted to say; it can denote an unspecified thing or an unspecified set of things, though specific to the sender. It is essentially echoic, or a restatement made more precisely: the sender of (11b) replaces *something* with *the right something*. Accordingly, something to say is narrowed down to something right to say. In other words, it does not matter whether *something* in *the right something* refers to a single thing or not. I would argue it is essentially equivalent in meaning and function to *something* in the standard use. In short, ‘unusual something’ differs from ‘usual something’ in countability, or more precisely, in pluralisability.

⁴ In this example, *mysterious something* is enclosed in inverted commas because it is a citation from the earlier passage.

Finally, the standard and deviant uses differ semantically (i.e., not syntactically) in terms of specificity and specifiedness: How specific is what is referred to by *something*, and how easy is it to specify? To conclude, what is referred to by *something* is more specific and easier to specify in ‘unusual something’ than in ‘usual something’. Remember the original meaning of *something*: some unspecified or indeterminate thing (material or immaterial), according to Sense 1a from OED. It is desirable to clarify this definition: Who is the thing unspecified or indeterminate to? The answer is both the sender and the receiver. The sender, however, might specify what *something* is, because they have in mind what it refers to when they intend to convey it. For example, in *I'll give you something special for your birthday*, *something special* might be specified as a more determinate gift like an iPad (though not determinate in size and performance), a less determinate one like a watch, or a much less determinate one like a gadget (which includes iPads and watches), or possibly something the sender guesses the receiver has wanted for their birthday. If the last one is a thing whose name the sender does not know but has seen, it would be specific but unspecified. In contrast, in the cases of ‘unusual something’, what is referred to by *something* is more specific than in ‘usual something’. In (11g), for example, *some positive something* is relatively specific in that it refers to a positive lesson humans try to draw from a wide variety of events, even natural disasters. It is likely unspecified to the receiver, and possibly even to the sender, or hard to identify what that positive lesson is. In (11f) as well, the two entities referred to by *two small somethings* are not hard to identify because they can be seen to come out of a vial, but they seem to be unspecified in that they are hard to describe. Thus, specifiedness depends on the context or situation, and specificity is higher in ‘unusual something’ than in ‘usual something’.

In summary, I have shown four differences in structural and functional aspects: i) word order, ii) the presence/absence of a determiner, iii) pluralisability (or countability), and iv) specificity and specifiedness. I will now focus on the similarities between the two uses to explore the relationship between ‘unusual something’ and ‘usual something’.

3.2. Similarities between ‘usual something’ and ‘unusual something’

Let us turn to the similarities between ‘usual something’ and ‘unusual something’. Since the standard and deviant uses, as mentioned above, are decisively different in structural aspects such as word order, they are similar only in the semantic aspect. The key feature they share is the original meaning of *something*, which OED defines as ‘some unspecified or indeterminate thing (material or immaterial)’ and the OALD as ‘a thing that is not known or mentioned by name’. This meaning is common across other senses as well, suggesting the possibility that *something* has a single meaning used in different ways, rather than multiple distinct meanings. This possibility is supported by the fact that OALD lists three definitions: 1) a thing that is not known or mentioned by name; 2) a thing that is thought to be important or worth taking notice of; and 3) used to show that a description or an amount, etc. is not exact. The second definition represents a narrowing of the original meaning, while the third reflects the indeterminacy intrinsic to the original sense. The second definition can be roughly regarded as a narrow use of the original meaning, and the third one as a broader use.

What feature does ‘unusual something’ have in common with the original meaning of ‘usual something’? My answer is thingness, or the nature of being a thing. *Something* indicates a thing or what can be regarded as a thing (e.g. an event). For instance, if you say ‘I found something good in the old bookstore’, you might have found a rare edition of your favourite novel. In this case, *something (good)* refers to an old copy of a book. Here’s another instance: if you say ‘something good happened last week’, you might have got a promotion. Here, *something (good)* refers to the event of getting a promotion, which can be regarded as a state of affairs, or roughly a ‘thing’. All the examples in (11) show that ‘unusual something’ retains the semantic nature of thingness. In (11d), for example, *that special something* refers to a diamond-studded Super Bowl ring. In

(11g), *some positive something* refers to a positive lesson. *Something* in both cases replaces a nominal it refers to or indicates, which typically represents thingness.

Another semantic feature that ‘unusual something’ shares with ‘usual something’ is the use of an adjective to represent an evaluation made by the sender, or more strictly, the attributor (of the adjective).⁵ Consider some examples of ‘usual something’, such as *something special*. In this phrase, the adjective *special* reflects a subjective evaluation, indicating that the sender regards something as special. Similarly, *something reliable* (e.g. *I'm looking for something reliable for the project*) consists of *something* and *reliable*, an objective adjective that conveys an evaluation made by the sender and/or others. The same is true for the function of the adjective in ‘unusual something’. In (11c), for instance, the adjective in *stupid somethings* reflects Craig’s evaluation of the sender’s cats. In (11f), the adjective *small* would be attributed to the sender (i.e. the attributor of the utterance).

To sum up, there are two semantic similarities between ‘usual something’ and ‘unusual something’. First, focusing on *something*, I have shown that some senses of *something* share thingness, the nature of being a thing or what can be regarded as a thing. Second, an adjective contributes to describing an evaluation made by the attributor of that adjective. I will now demonstrate that *something* in ‘unusual something’ is used as a PH.

3.3. *Something* as a PH

This section aims to provide a closer analysis of ‘unusual something’. While it is generally accepted, as reflected in many dictionaries, that *something* is polysemous, I have mentioned earlier the possibility that it has a single meaning that is used in various ways. For instance, OALD lists three senses for *something*. In the previous section, I suggested that the original (most fundamental and essential) meaning, as seen in Sense 1, is narrowed down to Sense 2 and loosely extended to Sense 3. With this in mind, what kind of use is ‘unusual something’?

In my view, ‘unusual something’ is a metarepresentational use, or a placeholder (PH) use. I adopt Seraku (2023)’s definition of a PH below:

(12) A PH is a dummy element to be inserted into the slot (typically, syntactic slot) of a target form that a speaker/writer is unable or unwilling to produce. (Seraku 2023: 109)

Following his definition, *something* in ‘unusual something’ functions as a dummy element to be inserted into the slot of the deviant pattern ‘determiner + adjective + *something*’ that the sender is unable or unwilling to produce. Simply put, *something* acts like a ‘vessel’ or holder that can be satisfied with an element the sender intends to convey. (11b) is acceptable, but leaving *something* out makes it unacceptable, as shown in (13):

(13) * She glanced at her brother and could tell he was struggling to find something—the right—to say.

In (13), *the right* on its own cannot be understood to mean the same as *the right something*. Thus, *something* is a necessary element, even though it is a dummy one. It functions as a PH to indicate that there is something (i.e. a message) that the sender is unable or unwilling to convey to the receiver.

⁵ By ‘attributor’, I mean the person to whom the adjective in a noun phrase is attributed in a given context. The adjective is not always attributed to the sender. For example, if you say ‘Mary is looking for something reliable for the project’, the adjective *reliable* can be attributed to Mary, the sender (i.e. you), or those involved in the project, depending on the context.

As the definition of a PH in (12) shows, there are two main reasons or motives for using a PH: ability-related and preference-related motives. The same motives apply to the cases of ‘unusual something’. Consider (11a), (11f), and (11c), which are repeated as (14a-c), respectively.

(14) a. Neil Young’s Book Is Not A Great Memoir, But It’s **A Great Something** (=11a)
b. The Dey took something from his sleeve, a transparent vial, and unstoppered it. He inverted it, and **two small somethings** tumbled out onto the back of Pallaton’s neck. (=11f)
c. Craig liked my cats, but he wouldn’t admit to it, calling them “**Stupid somethings**,” tossing them pieces of shrimp as we sat eating naked in bed at dusk. (=11c)

(14a) is the title of an online review of Neil Young’s memoir *Waging Heavy Peace: A Hippie Dream*.⁶ In (14a), as I briefly mentioned in Introduction, the first clause suggests that it is not appropriate for the reviewer to call Neil Young’s book a memoir, because the second clause replaces ‘memoir’ with *something*, holding ‘great’ as it is. The reviewer implies that he cannot call the book a mere memoir and considers it to be more than just that. (In fact, he says in the review: ‘This book is not a memoir. It’s something else, though, and maybe this is just as good.’) However, he is unable to find any other way to describe the book, so he has no choice but to use *something* as a placeholder for ‘memoir’. The replacement is ineffable for the sender. This seems to correspond to the unspecificity or indeterminacy inherent in the original meaning of *something*. Similarly, the use of *somethings* in (14b) is due to the sender’s inability to identify what she sees on the back of Pallaton’s neck, even though she recognises that there are two small things tumbling out of a transparent vial. *Something* as a PH seems particularly suitable for an ineffable, though perceivable, thing.

Somethings in (14c), on the other hand, can easily be understood to refer to the sender’s cats. This suggests that Craig does not use the term ‘cats’ intentionally, even though he wants to. In other words, he is unwilling to call them ‘cats’ because he does not want to admit that he likes them. It seems that Craig uses *something* instead of ‘cats’ to conceal his feelings and make his message slightly vaguer or more unspecific. In (14), the first two examples and the last one differ in the reasons for using *something*.

Consider an example where ‘unusual something’ functions like a quotative. In (11d), repeated below as (15), *that special something* is understood to be equivalent to the antecedent phrase *something very special*.

(15) In 1977, Warren Bankston won something very special. Last week, he lost it. **That special something** was a diamond-studded Super Bowl ring, a trophy from Mr. Bankston’s championship season with the Oakland Raiders. (=11d))

From a different perspective, *that special something* is a quotation of the antecedent phrase, even though they differ in word order. This ‘unusual something’ phrase functions as a metarepresentation. A metarepresentation is a representation of a representation, typically based on resemblance in form or content.⁷ One common example of metarepresentation is a direct or indirect quotation. In (15), *that special something* is a representation of *something very special*; it resembles the antecedent both in form and content. Here, *something* as a PH acts as a metarepresentation of an antecedent element, *something* in *something very special*. The PH and its antecedent are identical, or 100% similar to each other. In (14a), *something* as a PH seems to represent the sender’s

⁶ It is available at <https://litkicks.com/HeavyPeace/>.

⁷ For more details on metarepresentation, see Wilson (2000).

unspoken thought—something not linguistically realised but held in mind. It follows that a PH is a metarepresentation, and ‘unusual something’ is a PH or metarepresentational use.

Finally, I will focus on the pragmatic effects of ‘unusual something’. (15), for example, would be acceptable if *that special something* were replaced with *it*. Why does the sender use ‘unusual something’ instead of the pronoun *it* to refer to the antecedent *something very special*? *That special something* consists of three constituents: the demonstrative determiner, the adjective, and *something* as a PH. The first constituent encourages the receiver to access the antecedent, the second serves to remind the receiver that what Bankston won and lost last week is a special thing (specifically, a diamond-studded ring), and the last constituent, *something*, is simply a PH, a dummy element that does not make a significant contribution to the sentence’s meaning. Of these three, the most important in terms of pragmatic effect is the adjective *special*, because the pronoun *it* lacks a reminding function.

Let us take a look at another example below, which illustrates a different pragmatic effect.

(16) A newly discovered sea slug adds **that special something** to mating: simultaneous forehead piercing.

This is the opening sentence of the article titled *Sea slug mating features a stab in the head*.⁸ When the receiver reads (16), which lacks preceding context, they cannot immediately understand what *that special something* means or indicates. Therefore, they would expect to be able to specify its meaning or what is in the sender’s mind if they read further. As a result, ‘unusual something’ can create the pragmatic effect of encouraging the receiver to continue reading in order to resolve the ambiguity. These pragmatic effects arise from the essential feature of *something* as a PH, which is designed to be satisfied by an antecedent element or a thought in the sender’s mind.

This section has demonstrated that ‘unusual something’ is a PH or metarepresentational use of *something*, based on the assumption that *something* has a single meaning used in different ways. Given the definition of a PH in (12), *something* in ‘unusual something’ functions as a dummy element to be satisfied with an element that the sender is unable or unwilling to produce. It is employed when the sender is unable to bring to mind an appropriate way to describe what they wish to convey, or when they are unable to identify what they perceive, as well as when they are unwilling or reluctant to use a specific word and prefer to replace it with *something*. ‘Unusual something’ can evoke the pragmatic effects of reminding the receiver of the information conveyed by an adjective and encouraging them to read further.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper has described an unusual use of *something*, which I refer to as ‘unusual something’, in which it takes a determiner and an adjective as premodifiers. It has also demonstrated that *something* has a single meaning, used in various ways. Its original (fundamental and essential) meaning is ‘a thing that is not known or mentioned by name’, as indicated by the OALD. The original meaning is primarily used in the standard pattern ‘*something* + adjective’, where *something* is postmodified by an adjective. Semantically, it can also be used in a narrower or broader sense (Senses 2 and 3 in the OALD) within the same structure. In contrast, *something* can also appear in the deviant pattern ‘determiner + adjective + *something*’, where *something* is premodified by an adjective. In this case, *something* functions as a PH, or a metarepresentation of an antecedent element or the sender’s thought that is not linguistically realised.

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⁸ It is available at <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/sea-slug-mating-features-stab-head>.

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